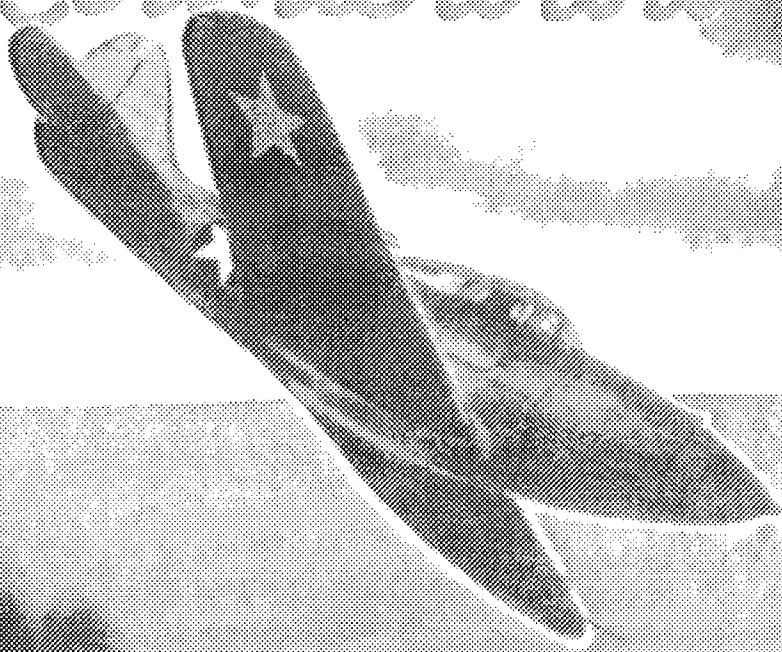




# Wings at War

COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

## PACIFIC *Counterblow*



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# Pacific Counterblow

THE 11TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP AND THE  
67TH FIGHTER SQUADRON IN THE  
BATTLE FOR GUADALCANAL

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*An Interim Report*

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# Wings at War

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COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

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Originally published shortly after key air campaigns, the Wings at War series captures the spirit and tone of America's World War II experience. Eyewitness accounts of Army Air Forces' aviators and details from the official histories enliven the story behind each of six important AAF operations. In cooperation with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Center for Air Force History has reprinted the entire series to honor the airmen who fought so valiantly fifty years ago.



## Foreword

*Pacific Counterblow* tells the story of the Battle for Guadalcanal (1942), focusing on the operations of the 11th Bombardment Group and the 67th Fighter Squadron.

Months after the devastation of Pearl Harbor, U.S. forces had crushed the Japanese fleet at Midway and then moved to seize the initiative. AAF commanders in the Pacific sought to prevent the enemy from severing Australia's supply lines. So the B-17s of the 11th Bomb Group and the P-39s and P-400s of the 67th Fighter Squadron, flying from makeshift bases at Espiritu Santo and Henderson Field, began grueling attacks on Japanese shipping between Rabaul, New Britain and the Solomon Islands. After several months of bitter fighting, American forces gained control of Guadalcanal, positioning them to swing forward beyond Rabaul to New Guinea.

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Lt. Gen. Millard F. Harmon, former Commanding General, Army Air Forces, Pacific Ocean Areas, who has been missing since 26 February 1945 when the aircraft on which he was making a noncombat flight in the POA was lost.

# Pacific Counterblow

## The South Pacific, Summer 1942

**P**EARL HARBOR secured for the Japanese the initiative in the Pacific. They chose first to strike southward. By March 1942 the Netherlands East Indies, and with them any opportunity of reinforcing the Philippines, had largely disappeared in the maw of Nippon's war machine. March and April a successful but less precipitate foe devoted to the initial digestion of his gains and the extension of his forces along the flanks of Australia. Already Australian security had thus become the first charge of U. S. forces in the South Pacific, and defense of Australia meant defense of the last remaining reinforcement route to the subcontinent—the 7,000 miles of island-studded Pacific seas lying between San Francisco and Sydney.

Twice more the enemy moved offensively. A thrust in early May against either Port Moresby or the Free French isle of New Caledonia, bastion of the supply route from the United States, was smashed in the Coral Sea. And after 6 June, with its ambitious two-pronged offensive against Midway and the Aleutians crushed at Midway, the Japanese fleet retired westward to lick its wounds. For the first time in the Pacific war, America possessed the initiative—a limited, precarious initiative, demanding the earliest possible exploitation.

How this initiative was employed is the history of the operation against Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. Primarily it was an operation to safeguard Australia's supply line, threatened

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The ranks of officers mentioned in this booklet are those which they held at the time of the events described herein.



first from Rabaul, secured by the enemy in January; then from Tulagi, where by May the Japanese were already well established. (It was at Tulagi on Florida Island that the *Yorktown's* aircraft carried out a successful strike during the Battle of the Coral Sea.)

In June grass was burning on Guadalcanal's Lunga Plain, one of the few spots in the Solomons where an airdrome could easily be built. Around 4 July, Jap troops and construction personnel moved ashore and in less than a month Allied search planes saw the first signs of what appeared to be a concrete runway.

The Tulagi-Lunga Plain combination was extremely convenient. Enclosed by the small islands of Tulagi, Gavutu, and Tanambogo, the harbor at Tulagi is deep and spacious; with air cover from Guadalcanal it presents an excellent naval base site. Backing this advanced base were Rabaul, only 565 nautical miles distant; Bougainville, with the important Buin-Faisi-Tonolei complex, protected from Kahili Field, at its southern tip; Kieta, where an airdrome was already being laid out—an impressive array of supporting bases. And from many lesser bases in the Solomons—from Gizo, Rekata Bay, Kieta and Buka Passage—seaplanes were already operating.

With Lunga airdrome complete, land-based bombers would be able to soften the New Hebrides for a thrust southward. If the Japanese were to be stopped short of a point where they could snap the life-line to Australia, then Tulagi-Guadalcanal offered the last possible opportunity.

The man facing this problem was Vice Adm. Robert L. Ghormley, COMSOPAC. As Commander, South Pacific Area, Admiral Ghormley commanded all U. S. ground, air, and naval forces in his area, and certain New Zealand units as well. His air commander was Rear Adm. John S. McCain, who, as COMAIRSOPAC, controlled all land-based aircraft in the South Pacific Area, including those of the USAAF.

### *General Harmon Takes Over*

Top Army commander in the South Pacific was Maj. Gen. Millard F. Harmon, who arrived in the theater to assume the title of COMGENSOPAC, Commanding General, United States Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, only a week before the Guadalcanal offensive opened. Subordinate to COMSOPAC, General Harmon

was charged with the training and administration of all U. S. Army ground and air force troops in the South Pacific. His advent clarified the supply and administration of the string of island bases and lessened any possibility of Army units disintegrating organically under local Navy, Marine, or New Zealand control.

General Harmon had stepped directly from the post of Chief of the Air Staff. Moreover, the small staff which flew down with him to Noumea in the last week of July numbered such officers as Brig. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, future commander of the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Air Forces; Lt. Col. Dean C. Strother, future commander of the Thirteenth's fighters; and Col. Frank Everest who was to command its bombers. If Admiral McCain retained operational control of Air Corps units, he recognized that the wide dispersion and dissimilar composition of his air establishment made it impracticable to exercise his command directly. Training and a certain amount of tactical discretion remained to COMGENSOPAC and his subordinate commanders.

In July the Army Air Forces were mainly represented in the forward area by the 11th Bombardment Group (Heavy) and the 67th Fighter Squadron. The former disposed of 27 B-17's on New Caledonia and 8 at Nandi in the Fijis. The 67th mustered 38 P-39's and P-400's, all on New Caledonia. The P-400, to quote the men who flew it, was "a cheap version of the early P-39's." Additionally, there were on New Caledonia 10 B-26's with a dozen more in the Fijis.

## The 11th Group and the Landing in the Solomons

**D**ESPITE the fact that a workable basis for Army-Navy cooperation had been reached at a time when the June victory at Midway made it possible to mount an initial offensive against the Japanese, the remainder of 1942 loomed precariously for the Allies in the South Pacific. The Midway battle had only approximately restored the balance of fleet power. Shipping was extremely short. Only the 1st Marine Division, reinforced, could be spared for the assault on Guadalcanal. General Harmon found himself in command of units originally sent posthaste in early 1942 to garrison the

stepping stones to Australia, units largely tied down to a defense for which they were scarcely adequate.

Nevertheless, preparations for the blow against the Guadalcanal area went forward. As early as April Tulagi had been designated the number one American objective in the Solomons. The Marines began arriving in New Zealand in mid-June; D-day was set originally for 1 August, then for as near that date as practicable. Arrangements were completed whereby General MacArthur's aircraft would search and bomb in the northern Solomons and strike the airdromes at Lae and Salamaua.

The final week in July saw the initial B-17's of the 11th Bombardment Group arrive in the South Pacific, the first squadron landing during a driving rainstorm at Plaines des Gaiacs airdrome on New Caledonia. The 11th had been based in Hawaii, was a veteran of Midway. Now, under the leadership of Col. Laverne G. Saunders, it was to participate in the assault on Guadalcanal.

The Army Air Forces, seeking to give air striking forces a mobility analogous to that of major naval units, had initially distrusted committing heavy bombers to fixed assignments in the islands. The area was described as "linear in type and of limited depth." Its defense, it was thought, could be accomplished more economically by holding major air striking forces at the extremities, and providing bases and logistical services for their rapid concentration against a threat to intermediate points. Originally this concept envisaged stationing heavy bombers only in Hawaii and Australia. However, in July the 11th Group was ordered to New Caledonia as the Mobile Force, Central Pacific, and below in Australia the 19th Group was named the Mobile Force in the Southwest Pacific.

Four days after the new designation, the squadrons of the 11th Group left Hickam Field, the 98th and 42d arriving at Plaines des

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In the early stages of the battle for Guadalcanal the AAF was represented by the 11th Bombardment Group (H) and the 67th Fighter Squadron. Later the 11th was joined by squadrons of the 5th Bombardment Group, and still later, replaced by the 307th Bombardment Group (H). Various other fighter squadrons stationed in rear areas, such as the 12th, 44th, 68th, 70th, and 339th, all eventually contributed detachments or moved up to the island as did the 69th and 70th Bombardment Squadrons (M). As the subtitle implies, this narrative is concerned primarily with the activities of the 67th Fighter Squadron and the 11th Bombardment Group (H). Thus the actions of the 19th Bombardment Group (H), located at Port Moresby, which were coordinated with the initial attack and subsequent actions on Guadalcanal, are not detailed here and deserve a separate narrative.

Gaiacs on the 21st and 23d of July, respectively. On the 24th the 431st landed at Nandi in the Fijis and the following day the pilots of the 26th set down their planes at Efate. It had been planned to base one squadron each at Plaines des Gaiacs, Koumac—also on New Caledonia—Nandi, and Efate, and advance these when practicable to the new base under construction at Espiritu Santo.

Lying directly in the path of a possible thrust from the Solomons, Espiritu had been a sort of no man's land. Admiral McCain, perceiving the value of the position to the contemplated seizure of Tulagi, had immediately upon his arrival in the theater in May requested that troops be sent in and an airfield constructed. The troops were sent but construction of the airdrome was not approved. Nevertheless, COMAIRSOPAC surveyed a site, built a road to it, and confidently awaited orders to complete the project; the orders came in July. All available troops pitched in and in 16 days an airstrip 5,000 by 200 feet was hacked out. On 30 July, Maj. Allen J. Sewart of the 11th Group's 26th Squadron set down the first B-17 on the new strip.

### *Pre-Assault Operations*

For the Guadalcanal operation, Admiral McCain divided his shore-based planes into task groups. The 11th constituted the second task group, responsible for daily search of the southern Solomons and their western waters, for tracking important enemy contacts, and for execution of air attacks as directed. The dual role of search and bombing assigned the B-17's by COMAIRSOPAC's operations orders had been foreshadowed by his policy of placing the B-17's, together with the Navy patrol bombers, under both Air Patrol and Bomber Commands at South Pacific air bases. The great areas of the Pacific, shielding a powerful and aggressive enemy fleet, made search a prime necessity.

With its service crews still at sea, the 11th nevertheless tackled vital photo work almost on arrival, flying photographic missions over the Tulagi-Guadalcanal-Gavutu area on 23 and 25 July and getting its first taste of local fighter opposition when float Zeros ineffectively intercepted both missions.<sup>1</sup> During the very few days remaining

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<sup>1</sup> The greater part of the operations described in this narrative took place before the standard names "Hamp," "Zeke," etc., had been adopted for reporting Japanese aircraft.

before the departure of the Marines for Guadalcanal, strenuous efforts were made to procure information on Japanese positions. Maj. Gen. Alexander A. Vandegrift, commanding the 1st Marines, was experiencing a woeful lack of photos, and Navy charts were badly out of date. In an effort to remedy this situation the 435th Squadron of the 19th Group during June and July had flown a number of reconnaissance missions over the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area from Port Moresby.

General Vandegrift particularly desired recent photographs of the north coast of Guadalcanal, the area he was called on to assault. He received only two, a print of Tulagi and one of the Lunga Point-Kukum area—both dropped on a carrier by light planes, developed, and forwarded to the Marine commander by COMAIRSOPAC, and constituting the first photos to reach General Vandegrift since 24 June.

At no time during 1942 were trained Army personnel or Army photographic equipment available for photographic work. Cameras came from the Navy, photographers from the Marines. Only the 11th's B-17's represented the Army, and this condition remained SOP until AAF photo and mapping units arrived in 1943. "Quackenbush's Gypsies," as Lt. Comdr. Robert Quackenbush's naval photo personnel were named, regularly flew with the heavies on photographic coverage of the Solomons.

Colonel Saunders' bombardment directive from Admiral McCain was both general and concise: to hit Tulagi and Guadalcanal with maximum strength from 31 July to 6 August, inclusive. COMAIRSOPAC left the group commander free to carry out this task as he saw fit, and the 11th forthwith inaugurated heavy bombardment against the Japanese in the South Pacific. During the 7 days, in addition to 22 sorties for purposes of search, the group flew 56 bombardment sorties, a most creditable performance in view of the primitive conditions under which operations labored.

Although the advanced field on Espiritu Santo was reported ready, Colonel Saunders was skeptical as to its service facilities and decided to open his attack from Efate, 710 nautical miles from the target at Guadalcanal. For his first mission on 31 July, Colonel Saunders mustered every plane possessing a radio compartment tank. Since each of the nine aircraft thus equipped also carried a bomb-bay tank, full bomb loads were impossible. But in spite of this considerable reduction in striking power, the initial blow was a success. Led by



Colonel Saunders, the Forts flew the 710 miles to Guadalcanal under the protection of bad weather and unloaded their bombs from 14,000 feet. The first flight, carrying 500-pounders, struck at the new landing strip, while the remaining six aircraft ravaged the supply dumps in the Lunga Point area with 100-pounders. Resistance was slight, the AAA ineffective, and the Zeros at Gavutu, probably without functioning radar, failed to leave the water in time for interception. The bombers came through Mission One against Guadalcanal undamaged.

It was determined that Lunga Point held the chief concentrations of supply and personnel and first claim to Colonel Saunders' attention. Next ranked the nearly complete Lunga airdrome, shortly to become Henderson Field. Tulagi also was to receive a quota of bombs almost daily.

Thus was the pattern set. On 1 August the B-17's bagged two Zeros, on the next day they got one and started fires in the Lunga and Tulagi storage areas. By the 3d, reports had come in of land-based Zeros on the Lunga field and on 4 August five enemy fighters intercepted a three-plane flight over the target. In this engagement a float Zero, flaming and pressing a close attack, struck a B-17 near the No. 3 engine, causing an explosion which destroyed plane and crew. This, the first destruction of one of our aircraft by ramming, was considered the result of a Zero out of control rather than intentional self-sacrifice.

With the field on Espiritu operational by 1 August, B-17's headed for Guadalcanal were able to take on full bomb loads, fill their radio tanks at Efate, and refuel at Espiritu on the return leg. Tulagi and the Kukum area of Guadalcanal were thus bombed on 5 August, when another B-17 was lost; and on D-day, 7 August, two search planes dispatched to cover the Solomons sector to a depth of 700 miles from Espiritu, by that time the main base, took off at 0300 with instructions to avoid the target area where the attack was scheduled at 0530. One aircraft failed to return.

### *Guadalcanal Assault Opens*

Below the searching B-17's the battle of Guadalcanal was unfolding. Two major task forces had been set up for the occasion: Rear Adm. Leigh Noyes commanded the supporting carriers, Rear Adm. Richmond K. Turner the amphibious force which would undertake the

assault. Over-all command of these groups was vested in Vice Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher on the *Saratoga*.

On 31 July the amphibious force had left Koro Island in the Fijis, where it had proceeded from New Zealand to hold landing rehearsals. As the fleet cleared the New Hebrides the weather changed to a complete overcast, effectively hiding the force from enemy search planes. Navy PBY's, meanwhile, operating from Ndeni in the Santa Cruz group towards enemy bases to the north, reported no hostile concentrations. At 0133, 7 August the dim bulk of Guadalcanal could be made out, and the assault forces slid past Savo Island, the one to the north headed for Tulagi, the southern standing in for the Lunga area. The surprise was complete.

At 0613, the cruiser *Quincy* opened on targets near Kukum on Guadalcanal and 2 minutes later carrier planes, appearing on schedule, joined the attack. Simultaneously the bombardment of Tulagi commenced. The landing at Guadalcanal occurred without opposition. Carrier-based aircraft from the *Enterprise* and the *Saratoga* shielded the operation. Instead of the 5,000 enemy estimated on the island, a mere 600 Japanese were reported by prisoners and these promptly took to the hills. The Marines met relatively light opposition on Guadalcanal during the first day, but at Gavutu and Tulagi, across Sealark Channel, resistance was fierce and these islands were not mopped up for several days.

On the 8th the Marines occupied Lunga airdrome.<sup>2</sup> The runway, damaged from 11th Group attacks, was rapidly reparable, and in addition to this important field, large semi-permanent camps, finger wharves, machine shops, radio sets, and an ice and power plant fell to the Marines. These gains, however, were not to be consolidated in peace. The Japanese reacted promptly with air and naval forces, and on the afternoon of D-day hurled two heavy air attacks at the transports lying off Guadalcanal.

The evening of the 8th, Admiral Fletcher requested permission to withdraw his carriers. Combat with raiding enemy aircraft and other causes had reduced his carrier strength from 99 to 78 fighters.

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<sup>2</sup> On 17 August this field was unofficially designated Henderson Field after Marine Maj. Lofton Henderson. Construction begun by the Japanese was carried on by the Marine 1st Engineer Battalion until the arrival of the 6th Naval Seabee Battalion. In November 1942 Fighter #1, one mile East of Henderson, was rendered operational by the 6th Seabee Battalion and had been used in emergencies as early as October. Before the end of the year Fighter #2, west of Henderson, was also in operation.



Fuel was running low and the presence of large numbers of enemy bombers in the area presented a serious menace. Admiral Ghormley agreed to the request late that night and towards morning the Air Support Force began retirement to the south. Its withdrawal left the amphibious force dangerously exposed to enemy air, and the decision was consequently taken to withdraw the remainder of the invasion fleet at 0600 the following day. Previously it had been planned that the transports would unload until D plus 4.

On the 8th the Japanese Navy took a hand. Through the moonless, Solomons night a Japanese task force, slipping down past Savo Island, closed with the Allied cruisers protecting the transports off Guadalcanal. Searchlights and flares illumined the sea; then the sudden shock of shell and torpedo—and when the Japanese fleet retired into the night it had sunk four heavy cruisers and one destroyer, the core of the forces patrolling off Savo Island. The beachhead was uncovered. The Marines were left to shift for themselves, and on 9 August the transports up-anchored for the safety of Noumea.

For a time, the 11th settled back into its search routine. On days immediately following the landings, the bombers covered the Lower Solomons on sectors ranging from 286° over to 316° from Espiritu to a depth of 700 to 800 miles. Ordinarily, contact was with friendly surface forces. However, on 9 August, two light cruisers, two destroyers, and a number of seaplane tenders were reported heading for Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel. Eight B-17's were bombed up and took off but, despite ideal visibility, failed to sight the enemy. Daily searches through 14 August failed to reveal anything significant—only a handful of landing barges on Florida Island.

By the 15th the Japanese were more in evidence. Destroyers, cargo vessels, even light cruisers began to frequent the central Solomons, and Gizo Island and Gizo Bay in the New Georgia group became favorite target areas for the 11th. Moreover, the tedium of the long searches was apt to be broken by engagements with the huge Japanese patrol aircraft, the four-engine Kawanishi 97's, or their only slightly smaller successors. These Goliaths were slower and less maneuverable than the B-17's; their 20-mm. cannon were outranged by the .50-calibers. Invariably Colonel Saunders' pilots attempted to close with them. The first victim fell to the crew of Capt. W. Y. Lucas when, after a 25-minute combat the Kawanishi, attempting to

settle her damaged bulk on the sea, was blown up by the Fort's tail gunner. By 30 September the 11th had encountered 21 Kawanishi; 5 were destroyed and 7 damaged.

Meantime the enemy prepared his counterblow. On 12 August Admiral Ghormley had reported naval concentrations at Rabaul and in the Bougainville region. A week later these concentrations began to appear in the Buin-Faisi area, and on the 20th the Admiral warned Colonel Saunders that the task forces to retake Guadalcanal already were moving down from Truk and Ponape. The grinding routine of sea search became of utmost importance. Day after day, the Forts, taking off from Espiritu at 0300, crossing over Tulagi at sunrise and, scouring the sea to the northwest, logged 1,600 miles of open-water flying.

Daily action had taken its toll. From 31 July to 20 August, 11 B-17's were lost, 8 operationally, 2 at sea, only 1 in combat. Men and equipment stood up well against the enemy. Japanese gunnery, both aerial and AAA, was uniformly poor and the supposedly fanatical enemy pilots showed little eagerness to close with the B-17's. During the 8 days of intensive operations preceding the landings, enemy fighters were engaged on all but two missions to the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area and other than in the "ramming" incident, no Fort was lost to the float planes. The few hits scored on the heavies were by 7.7-millimeter fire and not very damaging. Three crew members were slightly wounded. The pilots learned that the Japanese always attacked singly, that, if the Forts turned their formation into him, he would always draw off at the fire of the turret guns. Bad weather, not the Zero, was the chief antagonist. Lack of homing facilities and radio direction-finding equipment brought down more B-17's than enemy pilots did.

### *Operational Problems*

In the Pacific theaters nature and distance are usually as formidable a foe as the Japanese. When Colonel Saunders and his 98th Squadron set their ships down on Plaines des Gaiacs on 21 July, they found a red dust strip hacked out of a swamp. High in iron oxide, this dust, sifting through the filters, honed out the cylinders, so that shortly the B-17's were fortunate to fly 6 hours with a full load of oil. Additional complications were lack of service and maintenance personnel.

Nine maintenance men for nine aircraft were all that could accompany the 26th to Efate, and these nine served additionally as ground crews during the subsequent 3-week period of intensive operations. Under such circumstances, a large share of the service and maintenance burden fell upon the combat crews. The 26th owed a debt of gratitude to the Negro enlisted men of the 24th Infantry Regiment who helped to service the planes and even improvised spare parts. Artillerymen messed the airmen on Efate, while over on Espiritu the entire 98th Squadron, not excepting Colonel Saunders, slept under trees or wings, or in the Forts themselves.

The 11th had no water carts; two of its eight Cletracs had arrived at Nandi, when they were needed at Espiritu. The shops aboard the USS *Curtiss*, Admiral McCain's headquarters, contributed tow bars; but homing devices and navigational aids could not be improvised.

At Espiritu existed a fair example of South Pacific logistics. On 18 August Colonel Saunders described its unloading facilities as "one barge, a sandy beach and a prayer." Heavy equipment was slung over the side of cargo vessels into a lighter. Ashore there were no cranes and the small, finger piers made of coconut logs salted down with coral washed out and disappeared after 2 or 3 weeks' use. Since the supply officer seldom was informed of arrival dates, boxes and crates accumulated in the coconut groves. There was no question of living off the country; each item of food, clothing, and housing had to be brought in. The mud was there in abundance. Espiritu possessed a foot-thick covering of soft black dirt, a quagmire after the tropical rains.

The Navy had moved .50-caliber ammunition and 300,000 gallons of gasoline to Espiritu in preparation for the 11th. Fuel consumption had been estimated for 2 weeks of operations and a safety factor of 100 per cent allowed, but the supply was exhausted in 10 days and only the timely arrival of the *Nira Luckenbach* with 3,000 drums of gasoline prevented operations from coming to a sudden halt. Getting the fuel out of the drums and into the tanks of the B-17's was one of those impossible jobs which somehow got done. Gas trucks and trailers did not exist; the steel drums were dumped over the ship's side, floated ashore in nets, hand-rolled up under the trees, and dispersed in dumps of 20 to 30. From these they were loaded on trucks, rolled up on stands, and emptied into the tank wagons which serviced

the aircraft. On 6 August, all available hands—and available hands included Colonel Saunders and Brig. Gen. William C. Rose, who commanded ground forces on Espiritu and Efate—worked a bucket line for 20 hours in a driving storm to put 25,000 gallons of gasoline aboard the bombers. But such labors were not enough, and strike missions were delayed for lack of service facilities.

Espiritu's airdrome was no Randolph Field. A narrow strip cut partly from a coconut grove, partly from the encroaching jungle; revetments barely deep enough to keep a B-17's nose off the runway and so narrow a man had to stand at each wing tip to guide the pilots out to the short taxiway; no lights. Bottles of oil with paper wicks flickered along the runway and jeep headlights marked its end as the early morning missions took off.

The squadrons of the 11th were distributed as follows: The 42d at Plaines des Gaiacs; the 98th at Espiritu, where the 26th subsequently joined from Efate; and the 431st at Nandi. Headquarters was at Efate, but Colonel Saunders maintained a command post on Espiritu and flew part of his headquarters personnel there on 10 August. Nandi, the most rearward of the bases, was clean and quiet and served as a rest area and a convenient place for engine changes. Colonel Saunders regularly relieved his units after 1 week in the forward area.

Operational control defied the field manuals. The wide dispersal of the units and unreliable radio communications made contact with the squadrons exceedingly difficult. Colonel Saunders could exercise direct control only over the 14 Fortresses at Espiritu, and even this was complicated by lack of field telephones and motor transport. He was running four search missions daily and holding six aircraft for a striking force. In an emergency he might supplement the latter with six B-17's from Efate, but he strongly doubted that the Efate contingent could hit the target at such a distance. He advised General Harmon that additional fields were needed on Espiritu.

By the 18th of August, the supply situation of the group had become critical. Six ball turret doors had already broken off and no spares were available. Turbosupercharger regulators were giving trouble, as were flight and engine instruments. The dusty fields necessitated constant engine changes; Nandi's 12 spares were already in service and the next change at Plaines des Gaiacs would exhaust



**HEADING FOR HOME.** After a successful attack on the shipping shown in the lower left of the photograph, a B-17 of the 11th Bombardment Group (H) wings over Kahili Airfield as enemy fighters taking off raise clouds of dust. The picture was taken looking southwest. The surface ships are off the settlement at Buin, and the finger of water above the wing at the left is Tonolei harbor.

the supply in New Caledonia. But in spite of such operational aches and twinges, the 11th was prepared to take part in the series of actions known as the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, the first Japanese attempt to retake Guadalcanal.

### *Battle of the Eastern Solomons*

Following the disastrous Savo Island drama, there had been a lull on Guadalcanal. The Navy ran in small reinforcement convoys, but operated its task forces well to the southward of the island, out of range of Japanese search planes; and the enemy seized the opportunity to reinforce Guadalcanal on his own account. Nightly, his destroyers and cruisers shelled the Marines, for the most part without let or hindrance. The beginnings of the "Tokyo Express" were discernible.

However, on 19 August a light cruiser venturing on such a reinforcement mission was unwisely left exposed in Sealark Channel by day. A searching Fort spotted her, banked for a bombing run. The delighted Marines saw columns of dark brown smoke pour from abaft the warship's mainmast. She made for the open sea beyond Savo, her fantail afire, and later sank.

On the 23d the Navy received warning that the Japanese were moving on the Solomons from the north. Carrier task forces, including the *Saratoga*, the *Enterprise*, and the new *North Carolina* were readied to meet the threat. On the 24th the *Saratoga's* torpedo and dive bombers, engaging the Jap carrier *Ryujo*, sent her into an evasive turn, dived in a coordinated attack, and hammered their bombs the length of her deck. Fierce air battles during the day all but stripped the enemy carriers of their aircraft and by nightfall the enemy fleet, badly hurt, retired. The damaged *Enterprise* returned to Pearl Harbor for repair.

In relation to its striking power the 11th Group played an important role in this action. On 24 August at 1215 Colonel Saunders was advised of a contact with an enemy carrier force 720 miles from Espiritu. Admiral McCain, aware that a B-17 strike would involve hazardous night landings, left the attack decision to Colonel Saunders. The risk was accepted. Two flights of heavies were dispatched separately, three Forts under Maj. Ernest R. Mannierre and four led by Major Sewart.

At 1745 the three-plane flight attacked a carrier, dead in the water and under tow by a cruiser or large destroyer. On the first run the bombs overshot and the Forts banked for another try. Four direct hits were claimed. (Whether this vessel was the *Ryujo*, blasted more than an hour before by the *Saratoga's* planes, or another small carrier is unknown.)

When this flight returned to Espiritu the night landing took its toll. Espiritu's field was just a wide slash through the jungle, with low hills close in. As the planes approached, a tropical rainstorm drenched the field and the darkness was complete. Lt. Robert E. Guenther's plane, the No. 4 engine failing, went into a steep bank and crashed into the hillside. The pilot and four of the crew were lost.

### *Forts Assail Japanese Ships*

Sixty miles to the eastward of Major Mannierre's strike, Major Sewart's four B-17's surprised a second Japanese armada at twilight. Below the Forts plowed a possible small carrier, with escort of one battleship, four light cruisers, and four destroyers. The Forts steadied for the run. Two or more hits were claimed on the carrier, but final results were observed only by one ball turret gunner who contended that the warship could not have been a carrier since the 500-pounders had "knocked her turrets off." The attack did not go unopposed, and of a swarm of Zeros attacking the bombers five were surely, seven probably destroyed. Two of the Forts were damaged and all were desperately low on fuel, but Major Sewart led his flight back to Efate intact.

Again on the 25th the heavies saw action. The preceding day Lunga airdrome, now named Henderson Field after the commander of the Marine dive bombers at Midway, had been attacked by land- and carrier-based planes, the latter probably from the *Ryujo*. Newly arrived Marine pilots, defending the Guadalcanal lodgment, knocked down 21 of the attackers for a loss of 3. At midnight the Marine positions were shelled by four enemy warships, one of which may have been sunk by dive bombers from Henderson. A dawn air attack was anticipated but none came.

At 0835 on the 25th eight escorted dive bombers from Guadalcanal uncovered the main Japanese occupation force about 125 miles to the

north. One large and three small transports, escorted by a heavy cruiser, light cruisers, and four destroyers, presented a fat target. Thousand-pounders gutted the large transport and damaged the heavy cruiser. Eight additional B-17's, leaving distant Espiritu at 0617, broke the back of either a cruiser or a destroyer with three direct hits from 500-pounders and at 1015 saw her sink. By noon of the 25th the Japanese were making all speed to the north and Guadalcanal was, for the moment, secure.

From this telling action, the 11th returned to the tedium of search duties and primitive operational conditions. The enemy reverted to a pattern of harassing attacks and minor reinforcement efforts. At noon on the 25th, 21 Jap bombers pounded Henderson Field, and that evening destroyers landed reinforcements at Cape Esperance and came down Sealark Channel, guns ablaze. By this time, however, Guadalcanal had the means to defend itself, partially at least, against such measures; Marine fighters and dive bombers were based on the island and elements of the USAAF's 67th Fighter Squadron had arrived.

## The Jagstaffel

EXCEPT for lone, cruising B-17's, the Marines saw few friendly aircraft for almost a fortnight after the withdrawal of the Navy carriers on the night of 8 August. Meanwhile, back-breaking labor was completing the unfinished Japanese air strip, and on the afternoon of the 20th, the stubby little carrier *Long Island*, from some 200 miles southeast of Guadalcanal, catapulted two Marine squadrons, VMF-223 with 19 F4F-4's (Grumman Wildcat fighters) under Maj. John L. Smith and VMSB-232 with 12 SBD-3's (Douglas Dauntless dive bombers) under Lt. Col. Richard C. Mangrum.<sup>3</sup> These were followed in 2 days by five long-nosed Army fighters, P-400's of the 67th Fighter Squadron, under Capt. Dale Brannon.

The P-400's which flew into Henderson on 22 August inaugurated a route over which many an Army fighter was destined to pass before the Japanese were driven from the Lower Solomons. In none too short hops they had flown all the way from New Caledonia, employing the Atlantic technique—fighters, equipped with belly tanks, shepherded by bombers or transports.

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<sup>3</sup> TBF's, Grumman Avenger torpedo bombers, later appeared on Guadalcanal.



Leaving Blaines des Gaiacs on 21 August, Captain Brannon's flight of five hopped 325 miles to Efate, 180 more to Espiritu. The following day, with gas tanks topped off after the warm-up, the P-400's tackled the 640 miles to Henderson. Gas consumption had been predicated upon low engine speed, a lean mixture, a 15-mile tail wind, and, in Captain Brannon's opinion, a landing powered by the proverbial fumes. Imperfect navigation and enemy fighters were written off.

The P-400's flew on the deck, at 200 feet, through mist and low-hanging clouds. In clear spaces, they spread out; when weather loomed ahead, they snuggled under the navigating B-17's wing. A second Fort followed with rubber boats, to be tossed to the pilots if they bailed out. After 3¾ hours of flying, all five planes were set down on the Lunga air strip. The following day, Lt. Robert E. Chilson with 30 enlisted men of the 67th's ground echelon arrived off Lunga in the transport *Fomalhaute*; and when Capt. John A. Thompson brought in nine more P-400's on 27 August, the 67th was ready for action.

## *The 67th Fighter Squadron*

If hardships prepare men for hardships, the 67th was prepared for Guadalcanal. Its personnel had sailed from New York in January 1942 in a crowded transport with inadequate water tanks—the men had received a daily ration of one canteen for washing, drinking, and shaving. After 38 days at sea they were rested for a week at a camp near Melbourne, Australia, and on 15 March disembarked on New Caledonia, where the inhabitants, military and civilian, momentarily expected the Japanese.

The 67th's airplanes were not only in crates but of a type only two of its pilots had ever flown. The 67th's new home was a half-completed airfield up at Tontouta, 35 miles from Noumea. Its one combination truck and trailer took one of the crated planes to Tontouta every 8 hours, alternately groaning and highballing over the mountainous road. When the crates were pried open instructions for P-39D's, F's, and K's were found, but none for P-400's; neither were the mechanics familiar with the plane. Still the work of assembly went forward. The men slept under shelter halves, the officers in a farmhouse—44 of them in parlor, bedroom, and earth-floored

basement. All united in cursing the sudden, unpredictable rains and in fighting the mosquitoes.

Tools for assembly consisted of 10 kits of simple first-echelon maintenance tools. Lines were found plugged with Scotch tape; one P-400's electrical circuit had evidently had the attention of a factory maniac: when the flap switch was pressed wheels would retract; when the wheel switch was pressed the guns would fire. Nevertheless, in less than a month 41 planes were assembled with the aid of the 65th Matériel Squadron, and the pilots were checked out with only a single accident. The squadron, finding that the P-400's instruments were inferior, learned how to fly without them. Spare parts all came from salvage; and one plane, "The Resurrection," eventually evolved as a 100-per cent mongrel.

### *First Action*

When Captain Brannon and his pilots landed at Henderson, action was not long in coming. The Marine pilots had pointed out on a little knoll near the runway the Japanese pagoda which served as Allied air operations headquarters. Near it was a flagpole up which a black flag was run when an air raid threatened. There was no real warning system—the first radar did not function until September—but from other sources reports of approaching enemy formations were received.

On the hot, sunny afternoon of the 24th, pilots and ground crews were working around the P-400's when the black flag was hoisted. Already the drone of engines could be heard. Two of the 67th's pilots made a run for their planes, Captain Brannon and Lt. D. H. Fincher taking off with the Grummans in a cloud of dust. Thirty seconds later the bombs hit. The P-400's staggered off over the palm trees and evaded the Zeros sweeping down to strafe. The Grummans climbed to 8,000 feet, knocked down all but one of the nine enemy bombers, which may have come from the doomed *Ryujo* off to the north. The Army pilots happened on a wandering Zero, pumped lead until it exploded.

The Marines, living largely on the Japanese quartermaster, introduced the pilots to life on Guadalcanal. In the green, canopied Marine tents were straw sleeping mats and enamelware eating bowls—both Japanese. Also Japanese were the chow, largely fish and rice,

the cigarettes, and even the caramels. Socks, always too short, and loincloths were also available by courtesy of the Japanese QM. And across the river, a bare 200 yards away, was the enemy, with his snipers always alert for U. S. officers' insignia.

Until the arrival of VMF-223 and VMSB-232, the Tulagi-Guadalcanal area had been without air resources. Moreover, few supplies had come through to the beachhead. General Vandegrift had thrown a perimeter defense around the airfield upon its capture and was able to set up one battery of 90-millimeter guns and 58 automatic weapon positions against enemy air raids. The F4F-4's were immediately assigned the air defense of the area and the SBD's began to conduct long single-plane searches over enemy positions at Guadalcanal and northward up to New Georgia and Santa Isabel. Operating under Marine command, the P-400's soon took up part of the burden. On the 25th, they were up on dawn-to-dusk patrols over Henderson and on the 26th two pilots flew reconnaissance around the entire Guadalcanal coastline.

By the last week in August, Japanese tactics in the Solomons had begun to take form. In the Buin-Faisi area of Bougainville, at Vella Lavella on Kula Gulf and at Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel, the Japanese had bases easily supplied from Truk and Rabaul. By September, enemy men and supplies were being loaded on fast vessels—destroyers or cruisers. These marauders, hiding from the Henderson-based aircraft during daylight, by night came fast down "The Slot" between the parallel lines of islands, landed men and supplies, stood off Henderson Field, shelled it, and were generally safe in the central Solomons by daylight. Thus the enemy in the Guadalcanal bush would be reinforced to the point of mounting a final attack on the beachhead, at which time other Japanese, supported by a sizeable portion of the Imperial Navy, would be brought down from the Mandates as an occupation force. Such actions were feasible so long as the enemy controlled the sea approaches to the Lower Solomons. Once these were lost, as they were in the mid-November engagements, the enemy was obliged to rely for reinforcements solely on the Tokyo Express.

Meanwhile, air attacks on Henderson were carried out almost daily from Rabaul via Kahili Field in southern Bougainville and various harassments maintained against the American garrison. These latter were ingenious sleep-destroyers. "Oscar," a sub, surfaced nightly in

the dark off Lunga, reconnoitered, threw a few shells at either Tulagi or Guadalcanal. After midnight, an asthmatic two-engine bomber, variously named "Louie the Louse," "Washing Machine Charlie," or "Maytag Mike," would lay a stick of bombs across the field.

The 67th performed its daily patrols at the dangerous medium altitude of 14,000 feet. The planes could struggle a little higher, but the pilots, without oxygen,<sup>4</sup> could not make long-sustained flights at this altitude. The P-400's days as an interceptor were numbered.

### *Fail to Reach Bombers*

On 29 August came the first test. The P-400's were scrambled at noon to meet 18 enemy bombers with the usual Zero escort. Twelve went up in flights of four, climbed to 14,000, and, to quote the squadron's historian, "staggered around, looking closely at all spots within their vision to make sure they were just spots and not enemy formations." The bombers rode safely above, at 17,000 until the Grummans hit them, knocking down four bombers and four escorts. The discouraged P-400's returned to a runway swarming with men. The strip seemed to have sprouted bushes; as it turned out the ground crews were using them to mark bomb craters. Ammunition was exploding; grass, hangars, and aircraft were afire; and scores of enemy snipers in the trees across the river.

30 August was a busy day. It began for the 67th at midnight; the SBD's had been sent on a hunt for enemy destroyers and the Army pilots were continuously on the alert until dawn, when their regular duties began. That day these consisted of maintaining combat air patrol over four friendly destroyers at Tulagi. The enemy raid was due at about noon—"Tojo Time"—as it was known from the regularity with which the enemy appeared at that hour. The coast watchers reported 22 single-engine planes coming in from Buka Passage and at 1130 all aircraft came in for reservicing.

It was reasoned that the Japanese would not send Zeros down alone, so the single-engine aircraft must be dive bombers and their target the ships at Tulagi. Eight Grummans and 11 P-400's were in commission and were disposed to meet the expected attack. Four P-400's were to patrol over Tulagi and hop the dive bombers as they pulled

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<sup>4</sup> These P-400's had been intended for export to the British and were equipped with the British high-pressure oxygen system. No high-pressure oxygen bottles were available at either New Caledonia or Guadalcanal.

out; seven cruised the towering cumulus at 14,000 feet to engage the enemy as he started down. The Grummans were somewhat above the latter group.

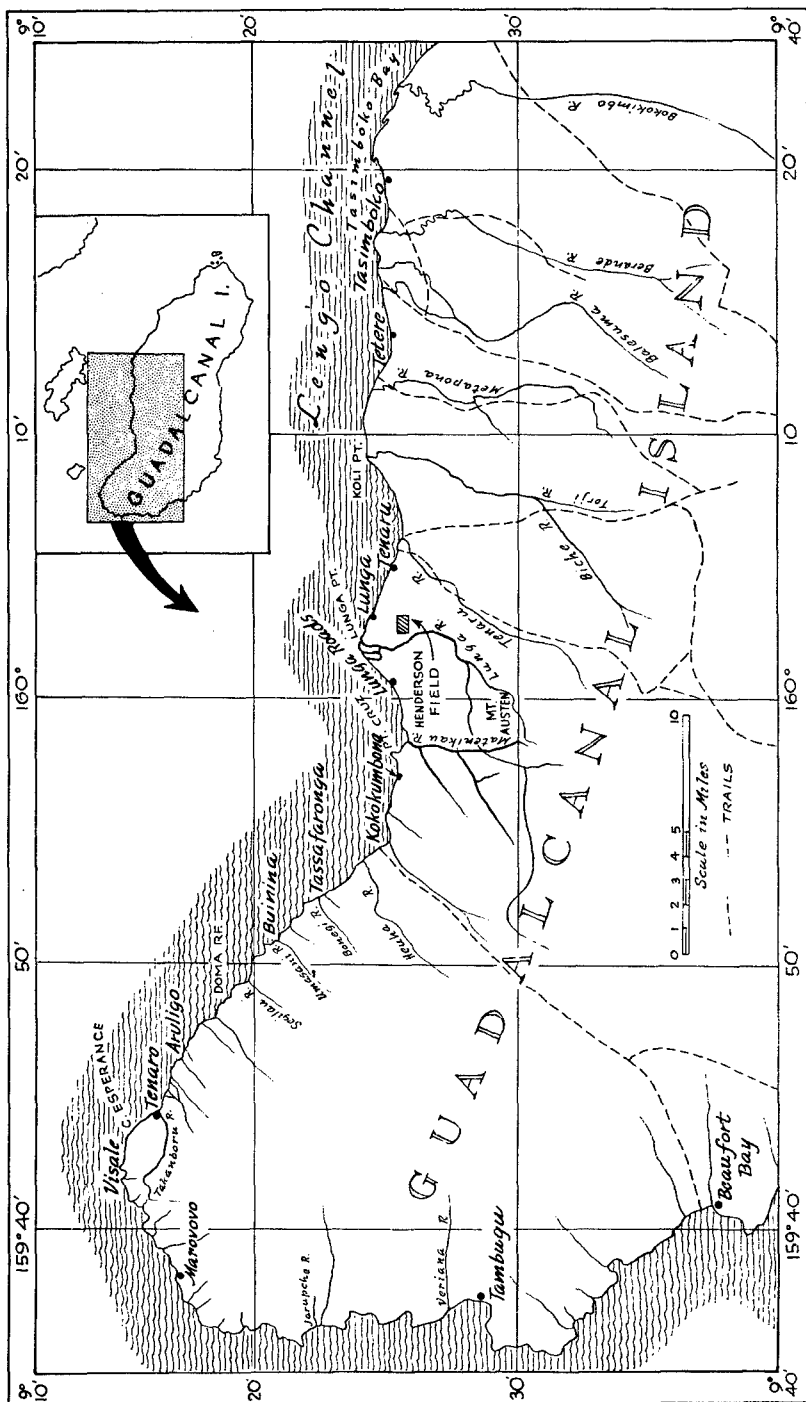
The seven P-400's had been cruising for about 30 minutes and already were feeling lack of oxygen when they were attacked, not by dive bombers but by Zeros. The agile Japanese dived down around a cloud, climbed up to take the P-400's from behind and below. They numbered about 20. The P-400's had started turning into a Lufbery in which there were more Zeros than P-400's when the Grummans dived and the melee became general. The astonishing Zeros were making almost square turns and the Army pilots found the only way to shake them was to head down for a cloud, make a turn on instruments, and come out on top, ready for a pass.

Below, the weather over the sea had closed down to 1,000 feet and quarter-mile visibility, and consequently the four-plane patrol started back. Coming out of a rain squall, the P-400's were attacked by a half-dozen Zeros and their formation torn apart. Two of the pilots, Lts. R. E. Wythes and R. E. Chilson, did not return.

Altogether four P-400's were lost, two pilots later making their way to Henderson on foot, after bailing out. Five of the seven returning planes were out of commission by reason of bullet holes. Against these losses, the 67th was credited with four kills. The Marines got 14.

That did not end the day's activities. At 1500, 17 F4F's and a dozen SBD's, with two escorting B-17's, arrived at Guadalcanal. Thirty minutes later, with 18 planes on Henderson, the Japanese dive bombers arrived. Ignoring the tempting array on the air strip, they caught the destroyer *Blue* a half mile offshore and sank her. Across at Tulagi, the transport *Burrows* ran aground and, to add to the commotion, nature intervened around 1615 with two earthquakes. That evening the Tokyo Express ran again, giving Henderson a shelling. Through all this, after but 4 days of operations at full strength, only three of the original 14 P-400's survived in commission on 1 September.

The air battle of 30 August proved that the P-400's on Guadalcanal could not be used as interceptors. In addition to the planes shot down, six returned to Henderson that afternoon riddled beyond repair. The 67th had early been aware of the limitations of its planes and the reports of the action of the 30th convinced General Harmon.



Henderson Field Area.

No Army or Marine aircraft then extant was entirely satisfactory against the Zero, but the P-400's possessed a peculiar disadvantage in that they were unable to reach the altitude customarily employed by enemy bombers. Rate of climb was low, wing load excessive, and the engine extremely vulnerable to hits in the glycol cooling system.

The P-400 had been flown under far from optimum conditions, but its pilots were skilled and courageous, as Major Smith, commanding VMF-223, later testified. General Harmon immediately asked Washington for P-38 and P-47 squadrons, or the P-40 with the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. Meanwhile, since the P-39 type was his mainstay in the theater, the General cast about for ways of improving its performance. He considered that since .50-caliber bullets neatly disintegrated the Zeros, the 37-millimeter nose cannon in the P-39 could be replaced by either a .50-caliber machine gun or a 20-millimeter cannon. This would have the effect of lightening the plane.

Washington showed equal concern over the record of the 67th and the specific dictum of General Vandegrift that the P-400 was "entirely unsuitable" for operations on Guadalcanal. But the war had to be fought with weapons presently available and considerable numbers of P-39's were on their way to Pacific theaters. The recommended solution was stripping the fighter to lighten it. By the end of September, the P-39K minus 650 pounds of its original equipment had achieved a service ceiling of 27,000 feet, and the Bell aircraft's performance against the Japanese eventually reached heights far above that of the old P-400's—the "klunkers," as the 67th dubbed them.

### *The P-400 as an Attack Plane*

Meantime General Vandegrift at Guadalcanal faced the immediate problem—he had the undesirable aircraft on hand and had to find a use for it. The planes possessed good defensive armor plate and armament consisting of a 20-millimeter cannon, two .50-caliber and four .30-caliber machine guns; they could each carry one bomb and their engines operated reasonably well at low altitudes. The Japanese, moreover, had shown no extraordinary talent with flak. As an attack plane, then, the P-400 could use its bomb on shipping and shore installations, its 20-millimeter cannon on landing barges, and its machine guns on enemy personnel.

About 20 miles east of Henderson, the Japanese held the native village of Tasimboko in some strength. The Marines planned to bring fresh troops from Tulagi, effect a landing east of Tasimboko, strike the position from the rear, and retire the same day. In preparation for this operation, the P-400's tried their wings in a new employment.

On the night of 1 September, two enemy transports and two destroyers lay off Tasimboko discharging troops. Foul weather having prevented the SBD's from interfering during darkness, Captain Brannon with five P-400's took off at 0600 to attack landing parties in the area. None were found, but five beached landing craft were sighted. At 0800 four more Army fighters took off; they dropped 500-pound bombs on the village and strafed both the landing craft and the village. Back on Henderson, Tojo Time was imminent and rather than sit out the attack, the P-400's returned to Tasimboko. In their absence 18 bombers, escorted by 21 Zeros, came over Henderson. The F4F-4's reduced their number by three bombers and four fighters, but the P-400's returned to a cratered runway, a burned-out hangar, three fired SBD's, burning gas and ammunition dumps, and a good many delayed-action bombs.

Such expeditions became routine with the 67th, which began to be known as the "Jagdstaffel." The mechanics could always produce a pair of "klunkers" to go out and work over the Japs. At first, the pilots chose their own targets—landing barges or supply dumps. Later they were sent out to bomb and strafe in the inlets and coves of Santa Isabel, where the enemy maintained jumping-off points for reinforcing Guadalcanal, and their bombing eventually became so accurate they could be assigned targets quite close to the Marine lines.

Day by day the P-400's went up to Tasimboko while the Japanese bombed or shelled Henderson. On 4 September, with only three Army aircraft in commission and 13 pilots to fly them, word was received that the enemy was putting men ashore in landing barges up on Santa Isabel, 75 miles northwest of Henderson. Led by Maj. Robert E. Galer in his F4F-4, the three P-400's were on their way by 1440; the target was easily located in a small cove. Six loaded landing craft were destroyed by two direct hits with 500-pounders and the boats and men still landing were thoroughly strafed. Alto-



gether a total of 25 landing craft out of 30 seen in the area were claimed destroyed. That night, however, the Japanese retaliated with the Express, a light cruiser and two destroyers sinking the American destroyer-transport *Little* and *Gregory* off Savo.

On the 5th, after all personnel on Henderson had undergone a dismal night of enemy shelling, the Jagdstaffel and the Grumman uncovered a prime target—15 fully loaded landing barges about 500 yards off the northwest coast of Guadalcanal. Six Grumman and two P-400's strafed until ammunition was exhausted. An Army pilot may have had this mission in mind when he came back to report that he and his wingman had literally cut a bloody X on the water through which Japanese troops were wading towards land. Two hours later, two P-400's returned to destroy most of the supplies in the landing craft which had grounded on a reef close inshore.

The Tasimboko operation—or, rather, raid—occurred on 8 September. Beginning at 0700, four P-400's and three SBD's bombed the area for 10 minutes, with the object of pinning down the defenders while the assault party went ashore. At 0900 the mission was repeated. At noon help was again requested, the Marines having tackled a rather larger force than had been anticipated, and the P-400's responded at once. Nevertheless, at 1530 the Marines asked that the P-400's cover their withdrawal.

Meanwhile, intermittent thundershowers had made 6-inch mud of Henderson's runway. Three of the P-400's were in commission and the pilots taxied them out. Captain Brannon lowered half flaps, held the brakes, and gave his engine full throttle. The plane crept forward. He wrestled it down the runway and staggered off. Less fortunate, Lt. V. L. Head lurched and skidded trying to pick up speed, muddy spray drenching the plane as it plowed through pools of water. Torque almost pulled it off the strip. Realizing he was running out of runway, the pilot tried to "hang it on the prop." The old P-400 stalled and hit, broke in three, and caught fire. Lieutenant Head was able to get out, though badly burned.

The third pilot took off through the flame and smoke. For 2 hours this lone pair of Army flyers covered the Marine withdrawal, doing lazy eights over the beach while the boats were loaded and launched. When the last had got away, the P-400's came in on reserve gas and somehow in the twilight got down on the strip.

By the time the Tasimboko raiders had returned, the Japanese were ready for a major attempt on the Marine positions. Their Express had been running regularly; their strength had been built to a peak. The Marine air establishment at Henderson was being whittled by operational losses and the necessity of daily interception. On 9 September, the F4F-4's were down to 11.

### *Lunga Ridge*

In anticipation of enemy thrusts, Marine air strength was substantially augmented on 11 September and additional planes came in on the 13th. By the 12th the Japanese had prepared a formidable push against the perimeter defense of the airfield. Bombers hit at Henderson by day and cruisers and destroyers from the Express shelled it by night. A particularly heavy shelling occurred during the night of the 13th, supporting a three-pronged assault on the Marines. Two of the attacks were held, but the most vicious struck at the Lunga Ridge just south of the airfield, a position held by Col. Merritt A. Edson's First Raider Battalion. All night the Japanese drove against the ridge. Colonel Edson's men were forced off the crest and down on the other side. Only the inner perimeter defense stood between the air strip and the enemy. Snipers broke through and the field was brought under mortar and artillery fire. Radio Tokyo announced that Guadalcanal was retaken.

The 67th mustered three of its P-400's to aid the Marine counter-attack on the 14th. At 0730 Captain Thompson and Lts. B. W. Brown and B. E. Davis were dispatched to "Bloody Ridge." They did not have to fly to an objective; they simply circled the field, visible at all times to their ground crews except when they dipped behind the low hill. Then the murderous chatter of their armament could be heard. They made repeated passes until enemy rifle and machine-gun fire forced two of them down in dead-stick landings; the last simply ran out of ammunition. The Marines retook the hill and buried the enemy dead with a bulldozer.

It was clear that the Japanese had shot their bolt in the night attack of the 13th. The American lodgment on Guadalcanal had survived another push.

By now, the maligned P-400 had proved itself. General Vandegrift consistently used the plane against any position blocking his Marines—

in fact, he even asked for more P-400's. COMAIRSOPAC's chief of staff, Capt. Matt Gardner, testified to its effectiveness in strafing troops and landing barges. The Marines preferred to use their SBD's against the reinforcing vessels. The P-400 had found in ground-air cooperation its niche on Guadalcanal.

In defiance of technical orders, the 67th developed its own technique of dive bombing. On the plane's instrument panel was the warning: "Do not release bomb when nose angle 30 degrees up or down or when airspeed exceeds 280 m.p.h." The Jagdstaffel discovered that the bomb would release at 70° and clear the propeller arc if a quick pressure on the stick was employed to pull the airplane away from the falling bomb. Dives averaged 300 and sometimes reached 500 m. p. h. Unlike the SBD's, which pushed over at 15,000 to 17,000 feet, the P-400's started their dives at 5,000, released and pulled out right over the jungle, zig-zagging over the palms to avoid ground fire and returning to strafe where the latter revealed troop positions.

The cover offered by the jungle and coconut groves effectively concealed the Japanese and distressed the Jagdstaffel, which often could not find the target or believe it had caused damage. Marine outposts reported enemy concentrations, which were shown the pilots on a map and indicated by panels in American-held territory. The P-400's dive-bombed the spot and came back to strafe blindly among the trees. Only occasionally did they catch a fleeting glimpse of a Japanese. However, the infantry, moving in, found bodies in abundance and sometimes silenced mortars, and captured diaries testified to the Japanese trooper's great fear of the "long-nosed American planes." The Marine and Navy intelligence officers who briefed and interrogated the 67th employed this evidence to encourage the Army pilots, and the Jagdstaffel took heart.

### *Henderson's Combat Routine*

The routine of combat at Henderson Field began around noon. Enemy bombers would arrive, 18 to 24 strong, high in the sun in a perfect V of V's, escorted by 20 or more Zeros in flights of three. Coming down from Kahili or Buka fields, the formation would bend its course around the islands to avoid being spotted. Some 150 miles out of Henderson it would reach altitude, then come in fast—perhaps as fast as 250 m. p. h.

As the warning came through, a captured Rising Sun flag, the signal to scramble, would shoot up at the pagoda. Every flyable aircraft would head through the craters for the runway. If the crews noticed a wind drop amid the dust, they knew the plane had run afoul of a dud hole or a small crater hidden in the tall grass. First planes on the runway took off first, two at a time—SBD's or P-400's. Once aloft, the Grummans, test-firing, would climb for altitude while the SBD's and P-400's flew off to work over Japanese territory. The ground crews worked until the black flag went up; then they'd hit the foxholes.

The 67th's ground crews shared the Marines' hardships on Guadalcanal, even voluntarily manning the forward foxholes on nights when a break-through seemed imminent. There were not enough of them for the job; they had few tools, no hoist equipment, no new parts. Only seven armorers had accompanied the original 14 planes. Refueling in particular was a back-breaking job. Crew chiefs regularly slept under the P-400's—in case individual Japanese were able to slip through the Marine lines. Nothing but combat matériel had accompanied the first flights to Guadalcanal.

After their repulse on Lunga Ridge, the Japanese evidently retired to give the Guadalcanal problem some thought. The elements of their solution, however, did not at once differ importantly from the familiar pattern. The Tokyo Express still ran and air raids on Henderson continued, as did the knife work in the bush and the activities of "Maytag Mike." It was clear that decisive naval actions and the landing of heavy reinforcements were necessary to secure the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area. These were in the offing, but not immediately. The Marines, reinforced by a large convoy on 18 September, made their preparations. The 11th Group on Espiritu and the 67th at Henderson carried on.

## *The October Crisis*

**I**N RESTROSPECT October was the crucial month in the Solomons. Though initially surprised, the Japanese had reacted vigorously to the American thrust. To begin with, off Savo Island their guns uncovered the Marine lodgments. Next, to exploit this advantage, they dispatched in late August a powerful task force which the

Navy turned back in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. The Japanese gradually built up strength which they expended at Lunga Ridge in mid-September. October saw the near-triumph of their tactics; they all but broke the American forces on Guadalcanal.

On 26 September, when the correspondent Richard Tregaskis departed Guadalcanal, he first went north to Bougainville in an Army B-17. The plane probably belonged to Colonel Saunders' 11th Group, although a new squadron, the 72d of the 5th Group, had recently arrived in the area. Tregaskis furnished a good description of a routine B-17 search mission.

The Fort he was in left Guadalcanal towards dawn and headed over Tulagi Bay for the northwest. The navigator, explaining that no excitement was imminently likely, took off his shirt to acquire a tan. Not until the plane turned on a Bougainville bearing was the first enemy aircraft seen. Two Zeros made a tentative pass. Later an enemy cargo ship went into violent maneuvers as the Fort approached. A float Zero got too close and the .50-caliber sent her down for a dead-stick landing. Meanwhile, the navigator counted and identified the ships below and the bombardier decided that the flak which thwacked against the fuselage was from naval guns. Another Zero made a single frontal attack on the Fortress without either aircraft sustaining damage. The rest of the journey back to Espiritu was without incident.

Throughout September and October, such missions were the principal occupation of Colonel Saunders' command, in order to keep COMSOPAC informed of enemy surface movements. Statistics of operations for those months reveal twice as many search as bombing sorties. From Espiritu Santo the sectors fanned northwesterly in narrow arcs of 6° each and extended approximately 800 miles with a 100-mile width at the extremity. The maximum coverage included Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel and Gizo Bay in the New Georgia group. When possible to stage through Henderson, the range increased—to the Buin-Shortland-Faisi area—where the bombers could keep an eye on freight moving down from Rabaul or the Mandates. These were long flights, averaging more than 1,500 miles—12 weary hours for the crews.

Occasionally, the Forts went even farther—to Kieta on Bougainville's eastern shore and then around to touch the Buka Passage. On

such lengthy missions it was not always possible to carry bombs, but extra fuel and reduced bomb loads were the rule. Targets abounded—at Bougainville's lower tip, where the harbor of Tonolei and Buin settlement lay behind densely wooded Shortland Island, and in The Slot, funneling down to Guadalcanal between the New Georgia group and Santa Isabel and Choiseul to the east. Tonolei, protected by Kahili Field, received shipping from Rabaul, Palau, and Truk, while sightings in The Slot included every category in the Japanese Navy.

### *Destroyers Hard to Hit*

Unfortunately, it was not easy to hit shipping. Destroyers were most numerous in The Slot, but they were extremely maneuverable and almost defied direct hits. The slower cargo vessels, offering easier targets, were nevertheless far from sitting ducks for a single search plane. Infrequently, a task force was sighted—battleships, cruisers, and escorts—and on 14 September, 250 miles north of the Santa Cruz group, seven B-17's uncovered such a force—three battleships, four heavy cruisers, and a number of lighter craft moving to the northwest. Through intense and accurate flak, two possible hits were claimed.

Weather remained a formidable enemy, aborting a strike on 11 September by seven Forts against a sizeable naval force at Tonolei and again turning back 15 B-17's tracking a carrier reported northeast of the Santa Cruz group. In this last search three Forts crash-landed at sea. Two of the crews reached the northern tip of New Caledonia and were later rescued. The third drifted 7 days at sea, lost two of its members to exposure, was finally rescued by the Navy.

By 20 September, the 11th Group had sighted 155 vessels of all types during 7 weeks of operation. It had bombed 19 and hit 4. Of these, 2 were sunk. The scale of attack was always light; 1 attack by 4 planes; 4 by 3; 4 by 2; and 10 by single search planes.

To increase the striking power of the B-17's, another squadron was dispatched from Hawaii in mid-September. Necessary maintenance personnel moved out of Oahu on the 21st in LB-30's—early versions of the Liberator. By 23 September the B-17E's of the 5th Group's 72d Squadron had arrived in Espiritu and on the 24th some of them

were already up over Shortland Island. In mid-October, two additional squadrons of the 5th Group were dispatched to the South Pacific. For all practical purposes, the 5th's squadrons operated as part of the 11th, an arrangement recognized in December by the establishment of a joint headquarters for the two groups.

"Eager" was the adjective for the pilots of the 11th, who showed a reckless tendency to use the big bombers as attack planes. The gunners were fond of strafing and the pilots obligingly took the B-17's down over the ground and dock installations at Gizo or over the float planes and flying boats at Rekata Bay. On 16 September, five separate strafing attacks were run over Rekata Bay and 3 days later the docks at Gizo were treated similarly. Such employment of heavy bombers disturbed General Harmon and he informed headquarters that he was putting a curb to such activities.

The over-all tactical situation at Guadalcanal determined, that is, limited, the effectiveness of General Harmon's heavy bombers. Although a Fort had come in to stay overnight as early as 25 August, Henderson was never stocked with enough fuel to permit continuous operations by B-17's. It was not stocked with fuel because the enemy controlled the waters of the Lower Solomons. The Tokyo Express ran often, fast, and in considerable strength. One way to hamper the Express was to hit hard at Tonolei and Buka, but the gas for these missions had to be picked up at Henderson, and Henderson ordinarily lacked it, until after the middle of November.

Moreover, the field, shelled almost nightly and bombed almost daily, was too exposed for heavy bombers and suffered as well from lack of service personnel. During the first 3 months of the campaign the Marines cheerfully took on a great part of the burden of servicing the B-17's which came in from time to time. By October Henderson had its Marston mat, but General Harmon doubted that the field could support heavy-bomber operations. Taxiways and hard standings were lacking, dispersion was poor, and rain was likely to bring operations to a soggy halt.

Nevertheless, in the first part of October, an attempt was made to restrict the use of Buka, which the Japanese employed as an advanced staging point for Rabaul-based bombers. As early as 2 September, 40 bombers and fighters had been reported on the field. On 4 October, only one B-17 could bore through the weather to drop a score



Official Photo USAAF

Brig. Gen. LaVerne G. Saunders, former commanding officer of the 11th Bombardment Group (H).



of 100-pounders on the strip and parkways. Eight days later, another mission hit the field more solidly; the bombs splashed along the runway and 10 parked aircraft were assessed as destroyed. Only two Zeros rose from the surprised airdrome and only one got back. On the 13th 6 more Forts repeated the mission, putting 6 tons on the Buka strip. The day when the Guadalcanal gas supply could back up a sustained offensive still lay in the future.

During late September and early October, the Japanese continued to run the Express, filtering reinforcements into Guadalcanal at a low but steady rate. Marine air at Henderson enjoyed only limited success in coping with it. The Express did not get within range until late afternoon; ordinarily only one strike could be accomplished before nightfall and weather often interfered, but whenever moon and clouds permitted, the dive and torpedo bombers roared out for night attacks. Back at Espiritu, Colonel Saunders found himself at a more serious disadvantage; by the time his B-17's could cover the distance to Guadalcanal, the Express would be out of range and dispersed up The Slot.

On 5 October, another method of derailing the Express was tried. The *Hornet* was dispatched to the north of the Solomons chain. Her aircraft struck at Kieta and depots in the Shortland area, and at Faisi hit hard at a naval force preparing for a southward voyage. Still that night the Express made its run, and on succeeding nights as well. But on 11 October it met disaster at the other end of the line.

## *Cape Esperance*

Army reinforcements were moving up to Guadalcanal in the second week of October. Partly to cover the flank of this convoy, but expressly to seek battle with Japanese units on the Guadalcanal run, a task force under Rear Adm. Norman Scott went hunting in the Solomons. The eyes of this force were the B-17's covering Bougainville's southern tip.

Current search routine of the B-17's was roughly as follows. Four planes departed daily from Espiritu and Henderson Field. Those from Espiritu took off at 0500, searched 1,000 miles between 294° and 324°, then landed at Henderson. Next morning, out of Guadalcanal, these same Forts covered an arc 450 miles deep between 300° and 340°,

flying to within 50 miles of Rabaul. Weather permitting, this was efficient coverage. To hinder such activity, the Japanese brought a fresh and highly trained fighter unit into the Shortland area. On occasion, the B-17's went farther afield, on 2 October to Kapingamarangi (Greenwich) Island, where photos were taken and the area strafed.

On 11 October, Admiral Scott's cruiser force, *San Francisco*, *Salt Lake City*, *Helena*, and *Boise*, two heavies and two lights, with attendant destroyers, cruised off Rennell Island, out of range of Japanese air search but within 5 hours' steaming of Savo. At 1345, Henderson reported search planes had discovered two cruisers and six destroyers southbound down The Slot. Further information on Japanese naval movement was denied by intensive air raids on Henderson during the afternoon. Calculating that the enemy should be off Savo an hour before midnight, Admiral Scott bore north, expecting to meet only the force reported during the early afternoon. Although the enemy's armada proved considerably more substantial, that fact served only to increase Jap losses in the night action which succeeded. The Battle of Cape Esperance cost the Imperial Navy two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, five destroyers, and an auxiliary; another heavy cruiser and various destroyers were damaged. Our own losses were 175 killed and a number wounded. The destroyer *Duncan* was lost.

Cape Esperance not only failed to stop the Express; it hardly gave it pause. However, 4,000 U. S. Army troops of Maj. Gen. Alexander M. Patch's Americal Division were subsequently put ashore in time to face the Japanese fury, which thenceforth increased in scale and effectiveness. The enemy was working up to another big push. He began by virtually knocking out the Guadalcanal airdrome.

At Henderson, the 67th Fighter Squadron had been continuing its strafing and bombing. New pilots had arrived; most of the original group were dead or back in the rear areas. New planes—P-39D-1's and P-39K's—were coming in, being assembled, tested, and flown up to Guadalcanal—just as the old P-40's had made the journey in August.

The 9th of October was a routine day. The field was muddy. Six P-40's were scheduled for a mission against the Kokumbona area to the west. Taxiing in the mud, one P-400 broke off a nose wheel;

another sustained two flat tires; a third simply got stuck. Still another plane proved to have a rough engine. The remaining P-400's bombed and strafed for an hour near a bridge west of Kokumbona and at 1100 four pilots returned to bomb. The enemy air raid at Tojo Time failed to materialize. Earlier in the day, the new P-39's had made their debut up in the New Georgia area, accompanying SBD's in an attack on Japanese ships. Of the float planes sent up to interfere, the P-39's shot down one certain and two probables without loss to themselves. Late in the afternoon, the P-39's, using 100-pound incendiaries and demolition bombs, worked over the Marovovo district beyond Cape Esperance.

In the succeeding 3 days the pattern was largely repeated. On the 10th, the P-39's went twice up to the New Georgia area as escort for SBD's on ship strikes. On the 11th, the 67th lost one pilot and was credited with 1 bomber in a scrap with 30 bombers and 20 Zeros carrying out the usual noon-hour raid. On the 12th, ground troops were again harassed; the P-39's flew top cover for TBF's and SBD's which went up after 3 destroyers in The Slot; and 2 P-39's cracked up in take-offs from the muddy field. On this day, however, a new note was added: a Japanese field piece began dropping shells in the dispersal area.

### *Henderson Field Knocked Out*

Admiral Scott had chastened the Express on the night of the 11th. Colonel Saunders' B-17's, returning from Buka on the 13th, stopped over at Tonolei long enough to score a direct hit on a transport and shoot down 6 of 26 attacking fighters. The Americal Division's 164th Infantry was disembarking at Lunga Point.

The morning of the 13th the 67th attacked landing barges which the enemy had beached during the night at the western end of Guadalcanal. At noon the air raid came. The Bettys were scarcely intercepted. The P-400's watched the show above from 12,000 feet; the P-39's struggled to 27,000 and still were 3,000 feet low; and insufficient warning prevented the F4F's from making contact in force. At 1400, while the fighters sat being refueled and rearmed, another wave of Japanese bombers made an appearance and was able to bomb at will, damaging aircraft at Henderson and causing casualties among the 164th Infantry, still moving ashore.

More serious, the Japanese field piece had again begun to lob shells—this time into the area around the end of the runway. The Seabees of the 6th Battalion had been racing up and down the strip with pre-cut Marston mat and preloaded dump trucks prepared for the expected craters, but their efforts had barely kept the field in operation. Pilots and mechanics were crawling from their foxholes to ready the P-400's for another mission—to track down "Pistol Pete," as the gun had already been named. Suddenly the mission was called off—no gas!

Just before midnight came the main event. First the noise of a small plane overhead. Then three flares, a red one for the west end of the runway, green for the east, and white in the center. The men were scarcely in the foxholes when bedlam broke loose. Off Guadalcanal stood an Express consisting of 2 battleships, 1 light cruiser, and 8 destroyers. For over 2 hours the bombardment continued. Runway and dispersal area were brought under fire; after a thorough pattern shelling, the enemy shifted to the camp sites in the palm grove. Gas and ammunition dumps took hits and all over the field aircraft went up in smoke and flame. For whole minutes the area was bright as day from the flares.

The Japanese let up long enough to cool their guns, then it began again. At 0315, the Express stood for home. Three bombers came overhead and dropped their sticks; then three more; and so on until dawn.

The morning of the 14th lit up a shambles. Tents were collapsed or shrapnel-riddled. The aerial defenses were seriously reduced; in all, 57 aircraft had been destroyed or damaged. To meet the Express, four SBD's remained, but no TBF's; to meet the Tojo Time raid, only a few Wildcats. The 67th had been fortunate—two P-39's damaged and none of the P-400's even hit. A few barrels of aviation gas remained. On the 13th Colonel Saunders' B-17's had been bombing over Buka and Tonolei, had returned to Henderson, where two of the Forts were so sieved that night by shrapnel that they had to be abandoned.

In the midst of the post-raid rubble and confusion, Colonel Saunders led out his remaining B-17's. Less than 2,000 feet of Henderson's runway was usable, but the bombers took off for Espiritu in 1,800 feet, drawing 70 inches of pressure without a cylinder blowing out.

On instructions from Marine headquarters, officers of the 67th went through the two derelict B-17's, destroying radios, maps, charts, and confidential papers, and hiding the Norden sights. For the time Henderson was useless as a heavy bombardment base.

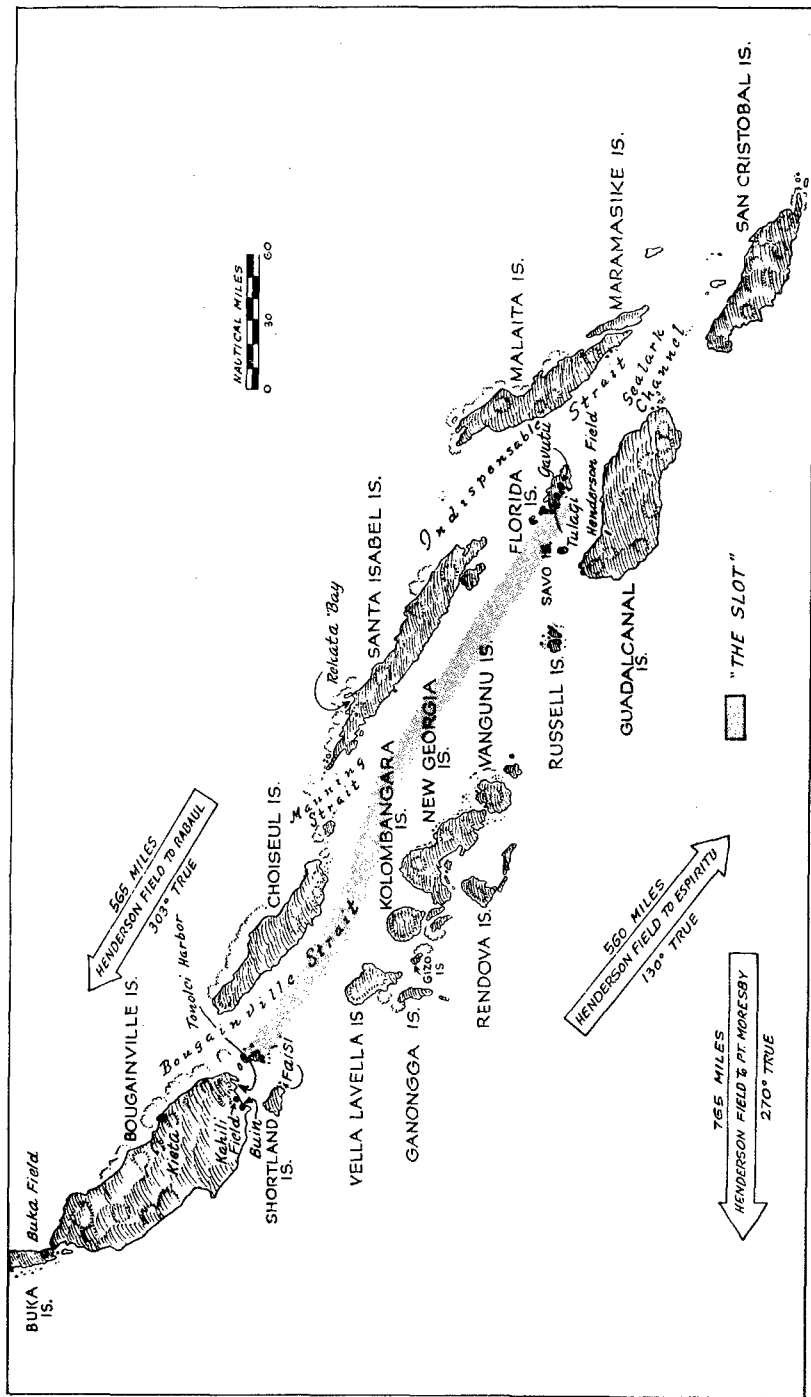
In fact, Henderson was very nearly useless for any type of aircraft. Pistol Pete—actually a number of guns—went into action again. His range, short at first, improved with practice, most of the shells landing in the area where the 67th's planes were parked. They came irregularly, about two every quarter-hour. As fast as the Seabees tackled a crater, another shell would whine over and dig at the same spot, scattering men and equipment. Still the Seabees tamped, filled, and laid mat, and for a time kept part of the field in operation. Providentially, back in September, they had laid out a grass strip 2,000 yards distant from and parallel with Henderson; although rough and short, this strip supported the light planes during the critical mid-October days.

In an effort to silence Pete, four P-400's were hung with 100-pound bombs. The pilots, parachutes strapped on, crouched in nearby fox-holes. One at a time, between the bursts, they ran for their planes. Drunkenly, they taxied out, careened down the runway with new craters pocking the surface behind them. All got off but failed to silence Pistol Pete, who was numerous, concealed, and frequently moved. Lack of fuel precluded further raids against him; every drop was saved for fighter defense.

Enemy pressure was relentless. At 1154 and again at 1303, enemy bombers and fighters struck, without warning or interception. Bomb craters could be filled, but the Seabees fell behind in their race with Pete. By afternoon of the 14th Henderson Field was knocked out. Down from headquarters, shortly after noon, came a Marine colonel. His words were reminiscent of the Philippines:

We don't know whether we'll be able to hold the field or not. There's a Japanese task force of destroyers, cruisers, and troop transports headed our way. We have enough gasoline left for one mission against them. Load your airplanes with bombs and go out with the dive bombers and hit them. After the gas is gone we'll have to let the ground troops take over. Then your officers and men will attach yourselves to some infantry outfit. Good luck and good-bye.

At 1425, then, 4 P-39's, each with a 300-pound bomb, and 3 old P-400's with 100-pounders took off with the 4 SBD's. Henderson had few teeth left to show the Express. One hundred and fifty miles



The "Slot."

of precious fuel was burned before the planes sighted the Japanese task force off the coast of Santa Isabel—6 transports in line astern, well screened by 8 destroyers and cruisers, 4 on each flank. The armada maneuvered violently, threw up heavy flak. The composite attack group pushed over and went down. No planes were lost—but no hits were seen.

Someone recalled the abandoned B-17's. The gas siphoned out of their tanks proved enough for one more strike, and for this one old P-400, saddled with 500-pound bombs, barely wobbled off the runway. This time the SBD's scored two hits on the Japanese force, by now at the near tip of Santa Isabel. The 67th lost one plane over the target, and another to a night-landing crash back at Henderson.

It was a glum prospect as darkness set in over the Marine beachhead. Another shelling was a certainty. The enemy ships were anchored between Kokumbona and Tassafaronga, only 10 miles down the channel, busily unloading troops and supplies—a prime target for an air strike, but no gas. However, the shelling which started at 0100, though heavy, lasted but a short time, newly arrived PT boats out in "Sleepless Lagoon" contributing to the premature withdrawal of the Express. And gasoline was on the way.

By mid-morning it began to arrive, ferried in by the work-horse C-47's. For over a week Henderson was to depend on the fuel brought in by this service, maintained by two Marine transport squadrons and the AAF's 13th Troop Carrier Squadron. All day long on the 15th the transports came in from Espiritu, each with about 12 drums—enough to keep 12 planes in the air for 1 hour. They braked to a skidding stop, the drums were rolled out, and the planes took off before Pistol Pete could lob a shell.

## *Henderson Strikes Back*

With gas on hand, Henderson prepared to hit back. Battered planes were patched, pilots belted their own ammunition, armament crews shouldered the formidable task of bombing up the planes without bomb carts. Ten men hoisted a 500-pound bomb on a truck bed. Hauled to the vicinity of the plane, then rolled through the mud, the bombs were lifted and fitted into the racks by as many men as could crowd under the aircraft's belly. All this on empty stomachs—with

the cooks in the foxholes, it had been hardtack and cold hash since the 13th.

Down the beach were numerous targets. Between Kokumbona and Doma Reef, five transports and eight destroyers were pouring ashore upwards of 10,000 troops. No infiltration this, but invasion in force, with a constant patrol of Zeros over the ships. All day on the 15th, the Henderson aircraft smashed at the convoy.

No sooner were the planes airborne than objectives were visible, and waiting Zeros swept down on the Army and Marine planes starting their dives. The destroyers contributed heavy flak. In this situation, the technique of the P-39's and P-400's shaped up somewhat as follows: they tried to disregard enemy fighters, dived, released when the ship was dead center in the gun sight, pulled out over the mast, and zig-zagged out of the ack-ack. Then to Henderson for another load.

Results were encouraging. One of the 67th's pilots got a probable, two other scored hits which damaged two transports; still another dropped on a transport which caught fire, exploded, and sank. The air score was even—one Zero for one pilot of the 67th. Altogether the fighter squadron sent three missions up the beach on the 15th, and in addition weathered the usual high-level Tojo Time raid.

The Forts also had a hand in the battle. On the 14th, six had come up from Espiritu to pound the Express, but lost it in the darkness of Indispensable Strait. On the 15th, 11 of them, now back, possibly damaged a transport and fired what was thought to be a light cruiser. Of the 20 Zeros covering the landing operation, the bombers knocked down nearly half, and though many sustained major damage, all the Forts made the 640 miles back to Espiritu.

The night of the 15th Henderson Field absorbed a shelling by a cruiser, but in the morning the enemy task force had left. Three of its transports lay blazing hulks on the beach, but troops, armament, and supplies had gone ashore. Harassment of these reinforcements became a principal mission of the Henderson-based aircraft. As often as they could be refueled and rearmed, P-39's, P-400's, and SBD's went down to Kokumbona. The F4F-4's made the daily Japanese raids a costly business; on the 23d, for instance, 24 Grummans, intercepting 16 bombers and 25 fighters, shot down 20 Zeros and 2 bombers with no losses.



These days, prelude to a big enemy push, were utter weariness to the 67th. Repeated missions multiplied the work of men forced by repeated bombings and shellings to spend most of their time in fox-holes. Sleep and sufficient food were always lacking. Planes were wearing out. One day, four P-400's took the air. The first had a bomb, but only one .30-caliber machine gun functioning; number two had a bomb and no functioning armament, numbers three and four had most of their guns in commission, but no bombs. Personnel cracked under the strain. On the 18th, officers and men, affected by repeated bombings, were evacuated to New Caledonia.

Apparently the Japanese were sanguine of the outcome; their German allies announced that two important airfields had been captured from U. S. forces in the Solomons. In Washington, Secretary Knox hinted at the seriousness of the situation. The main strip at Henderson was only recurrently in operation despite prodigious efforts to erase the pockmarks. Up in the northern Solomons the Japanese marshaled cargo and warships and the Express ran on the nights of the 16th, 18th, and 20th—destroyers and cruisers feeding the units ashore with foreboding regularity. The new COMSOPAC, Adm. William F. Halsey, Jr., soberly prepared to counter a thrust by sea.

### *The Japs' Grand Assault*

Decision, however, was reached on land. The Japanese plan envisaged simultaneous attacks, eastward across the Matanikau and from a point south of the airfield. D-day was 23 October; for days before, patrols probed the American lines. But the grand assault, from the Japanese point of view, was bungled; the attacks were delivered separately, and separately they were beaten back.

The Matanikau action proceeded on schedule, if not according to plan. Ten tanks and thousands of fresh troops, with ample artillery support, were thrown against the defenders. Four times on the 23d the enemy lashed at positions held by the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 5th Marines. American half-tracks mounting 75's knocked out the tanks one by one as they attempted to cross the Matanikau, and the Marines picked off about 2,000 Japanese troops. Undaunted, the enemy repeated the effort at dawn of the 24th. The P-400's went

over, bombing and strafing the enemy lines, and all through the day recurrent attacks were checked, although heavy afternoon rains grounded the planes at Henderson.

At 0800 on the 25th, the men on Henderson Field were surprised to find five Zeros circling above their strip, making no effort to strafe. Soon this number swelled to 14 and a medium bomber, all awaiting the signal to land, apparently under the impression that the field was in Jap hands. No signal came, and as soon as the mud had dried sufficiently, eight Grummans left the field and shot down the whole force.

The Express had put in an appearance during the early morning. One heavy cruiser, one light cruiser, and four destroyers landed troops and supplies and began to support with shellfire enemy attacks on the embattled beachhead. The SBD's and the 67th went after this force, making four separate attacks. At 1420, Lieutenants Dinn, Purnell, and Jacobsen in P-39's caught the ships northeast of Florida Island, barely missing them with 500-pound bombs. Two hours later, these three and Captain Mitchell attacked once more, Lieutenant Jacobsen putting his bomb squarely on the heavy cruiser. Near misses on the light cruiser were obtained and the warships, trailing oil slicks, moved slowly off.

On the 25th the enemy staged his attack from the south, striking along Lunga Ridge. Although the Marines and the 164th Infantry piled the attackers six deep, a night assault broke through until some enemy elements stood close to the south side of Henderson. The morning of the 26th a desperate American counterattack cleared the field. Three of the old P-400's and two P-39's did their bit, bombing and strafing the area south of the grass fighter strip. The counter-attack of the morning of the 26th, as it turned out, ended the Japanese threat by land, but a major sea action was brewing.

In the Japanese plans, possession of Henderson Field was apparently a prerequisite to a grand assault on Guadalcanal. With the strip harboring friendly carrier planes instead of the redoubtable Grummans, SBD's, P-39's, and P-400's, additional troops could be safely brought in for a mop-up. The Japanese fleet, meanwhile, could be expected to see that the American Navy did not interfere. Appreciation of the

enemy intentions clarifies the role of the carrier action of 26 October, known as the Battle of Santa Cruz Islands.

## *Enemy Confident*

The success of their land drive on 25 October must have made the capture of Henderson seem only a matter of hours to the Japanese, and down from the Mandates moved a force formidable enough to clinch the argument. Admiral Halsey had scraped his Pacific resources to meet it. The *Enterprise* and the new *South Dakota* were rushed down from Pearl Harbor, where the former had been recovering from wounds received in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. With the *Hornet*, these two composed the nucleus of the force with which Rear Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid was skirting the Santa Cruz Islands on 26 October, ready to intercept whatever enemy forces the Mandates might offer.

On that day the search planes—B-17's and PBY's—were out from Espiritu. East of Malaita, Lt. Mario Sesso of the 5th Group located one section of the Japanese force—which mustered four carriers and four battleships, with a wealth of escort, transports, and auxiliaries. During a half-hour's observation Lieutenant Sesso developed his report until it included a battleship, several cruisers, destroyers, and a possible carrier. Seven carrier-borne Nagoya Zeros attempted to interfere. Two fell away smoking and one disintegrated in a frontal attack. The Fortress suffered failure of the lower turret and loss of one gun in the tail, another in the upper turret. The Zeros killed the bombardier, but the Fort came back and the report got through to the fleet.

In the Santa Cruz action, the Japanese, by destroying the *Hornet*, reduced the American carriers in the South Pacific to the again-damaged *Enterprise*. They had sustained damage to two carriers themselves, as well as to a *Kongo* class battleship, but it is unlikely that this punishment prompted their withdrawal. The American troops on Guadalcanal stood fast; Henderson's aircraft could still hit an occupation force. The Japanese, consistently enough, withdrew. The beachhead actually had saved itself.

# The Securing of Guadalcanal

ON one of the last days of October 1942, the U. S. Navy's submarine *Amberjack* slipped cautiously into Tulagi. Her mission, cargo, and passengers were not usual for a submarine, but well attuned to the Solomons campaign, in which almost anything was more than likely to happen. The *Amberjack's* spare fuel tanks carried aviation gasoline—Henderson still suffered from insufficient gas. She carried torpedoes for the Tulagi-based PT boats—Guadalcanal still suffered from the visits of the Express. She carried, in addition, Army Air Forces personnel, 15 airplane mechanics and armorers for the worn 67th Fighter Squadron—which had always suffered from lack of manpower.

After their big push the Japanese had receded somewhat and the situation on Guadalcanal showed some improvement. The Express still ran, although harassed by the two dozen submarines COMSOPAC operated in the area and by the pilots from Henderson, whose two strips had recovered from the ravages of October.

General Vandegrift's Marines celebrated by striking across the Matanikau on 30 October. For a change, American warships, the light cruiser *Atlanta* and four destroyers, stood offshore in support. By 3 November, the Marines were beyond Point Cruz. However, on the night of 2 November, the industrious Japanese landed 1,500 men east of Koli Point and the American push to the west was checked. On 4 November, the *San Francisco*, *Helena*, and *Sterett* obligingly shelled this force, which because of subsequent attentions by the Marines never seriously threatened American positions.

The 67th was carrying the war to the enemy in its own way. On the 3d of November, for instance, two pilots bombed AAA emplacements at Kokumbona. Two more were up over the hills on reconnaissance, and, since intelligence had reported Japanese troops east of the Tenaru, the afternoon was devoted to bombing and strafing this region. The pilots went out in pairs, dropping 100- and 500-pound bombs, and returning with numerous bullet holes in their craft.

The routine was not light. Usually 4 or 5 missions were run, but on some days the total might rise to 12 or more. As the newer P-39's arrived, they were frequently dispatched to escort Marine strike forces, or as dive bombers in company with the SBD's. One of the missions



VETERAN. The P-400 that went through the entire Guadalcanal campaign is shown here just before it was sent to the United States for display. The officers, reading left to right, are Majors G. W. Phillips, C. E. Allard, and A. W. Price, respectively Intelligence Officer, Adjutant, and Executive Officer of the 67th Fighter Squadron.

of 3 November had the following participants: 15 SBD's, 4 P-39's, 2 P-400's, 1 TBF, and 7 F4F's—all out after the Japanese who had come ashore near Koli Point. Such conglomerations constituted the primary weapon against the Express.

The afternoon of 7 November, 11 southbound Japanese warships were sighted northeast of Santa Isabel and the composite force went into action. Out from Henderson flew 7 SBD's with 1,000-pounders, 3 torpedo-laden TBF's, and 8 P-39's lugging 500-pound bombs, the whole escorted by 22 Wildcats. The Army pilots' instructions specified they were first to bomb the warships, identified as 1 light cruiser and 10 destroyers, pull out, and join the Grummans as high cover. However, the P-39's were held up on the take-off and were overtaking the rest of the formation when they saw 3 float Zeroes and 2 float biplanes about to attack 2 F4F's. Jettisoning their bombs, the P-39's shot down all 5. Ahead, the strike was succeeding. The TBF's put 2 torpedoes into the cruiser and 1 into a destroyer, while the SBD's planted a 1,000-pounder on the cruiser. In the air battle, the enemy lost 15 float planes, the Marines 4 F4F's.

The B-17's continued their searches from Espiritu. Daily six were out, occasionally eight to provide a broader coverage. Air opposition had for the time diminished, but to vary the routine there might be a surfaced sub to strafe or a flight of float Zeros to dispute the passage. So far as bombing was concerned, without the necessary fuel at Henderson the B-17's could not get up to Buin-Tonolei from where the Japanese would mount any further offensive.

### *Japs Plan Offensive*

That the Japanese were contemplating such an offensive was obvious. By 9 November, reports of concentrations began to come in. As of 12 November, when the battle was already under way, estimates put the enemy's strength at two carriers, four battleships, five heavy cruisers, and all the escort and shipping needed for a major attempt on Guadalcanal. Against such a force, Admiral Halsey's resources were slim, his principal units being the apparently indestructible *Enterprise*, under repair, the *Washington*, and the *South Dakota*.

Additional complication was the fact that COMSOPAC was re-

quired not only to turn the Japanese thrust but to put Army and Marine reinforcements on Guadalcanal. To aid the Guadalcanal garrison, these reinforcements had to be landed on the island and unloaded before the Japanese boiled down from Buin in any great strength. Moreover, the transports had to be safely removed again. Time was extremely short and the whole operation distinctly ticklish. Fortunately, Admiral Turner, in charge of supplying Guadalcanal, had developed a fairly accurate estimate of the chronology of Japanese moves. The predicted enemy timetable ran somewhat like this: land-based bombing of Henderson starting on 10 November; naval bombardment on the night of the 11th; a carrier air attack on the field on the 12th, with naval bombardment and landings that night. The invasion force was expected on Friday the 13th.

Since the U. S. transports had to clear Guadalcanal by Thursday night, cargo vessels were to be off Lunga Point at dawn of Wednesday, the 11th; transports from Noumea would arrive Thursday morning. The escorts of these groups, combined under Rear Adm. Daniel J. Callaghan, were to deal with any Japanese naval force poking around in Sleepless Lagoon. A great deal depended on the speed of unloading and on the Japanese doing nothing unexpected.

The cargo vessels moved in on schedule and commenced unloading. At 0935, they were attacked and slightly damaged by dive-bombing Aichi 99's, the Marines losing six planes in the fight with bombers and escort. At 1127 the high-level raid occurred; eight of the 67th's pilots were forced to sit this one out at 12,000 while the Marines went up to destroy six of the raiders. That night, Admiral Callaghan swept Savo Sound without incident.

The American transports anchored off Kukum beach at 0530 on Thursday the 12th, screened by cruisers and destroyers. At 1340, on warning of an approaching enemy formation, the ships got under way and formed in anti-aircraft disposition. High above the island, concealed in a cloud, waited Capt. Joe Foss and his Grumman's. Not far below cruised eight P-39's ready, after their bombing and strafing routine, for aerial combat. The combination of naval anti-aircraft guns and Henderson's fighters proved lethal to the Japanese airmen.

At 1405, upwards of 20 torpedo bombers appeared low from behind Florida Island. In a long line abreast, they headed for the transports, eight Zeros covering. Diving into the combat, the P-39's found their

canopies covered with mist as warmer air was reached, and one pilot, blinded, continued down into the sea. He was the 67th's only loss as against one Zero and one torpedo bomber to its credit. Altogether, three Zeros and one torpedo plane got away; none of the American ships sustained serious damage.

Scout planes up The Slot, meanwhile, had discovered that the Japanese were moving down a task force, probably with the intention of attacking the transports off Guadalcanal, and towards evening the latter were accordingly withdrawn. Then Admiral Callaghan headed back for Savo, where he fought against odds, one of the wildest night actions in naval history. Both sides suffered heavily, the Japanese more heavily, and Henderson took no shelling that night.

### *Air Reinforcements*

Thus far the defense had succeeded, but the main Japanese onslaught had not yet been met. To counter it, the *Enterprise*, *South Dakota*, and *Washington* had moved out from Noumea on the 11th. COMSOPAC began to concentrate land-based aircraft on Guadalcanal. Fresh SBD's, TBF's, and Wildcats were flown in and on 12 November, at 1530, something new was added. Eight Lightnings landed on the fighter strip just east of Henderson.

There is a pleasant story about the advent of these P-38's. It holds that as the Marines on the field spotted the Army pilots climbing out of their formidable fighters they cheered wildly and rushed out to greet them—with reason, for old friends had come. Leading the flight was Maj. Dale Brannon, who back in August had brought the first P-400's, the "klunkers," into the strip the Japanese had begun. With him were other former 67th pilots, veterans of the Jagdstaffel.

The eight P-38's belonged to the 339th Fighter Squadron. Late in August it had been decided to activate a fighter group in New Caledonia, to comprise the 67th, 68th, and 70th Fighter Squadrons and another yet to be activated. By the end of September the orders had gone out; on 3 October, the 347th Fighter Group and the 339th Fighter Squadron were officially in existence. As cadre for the 339th, the old 67th provided 29 officers and 106 enlisted men, with Major Brannon in command. With him to the new organization passed the four lieutenants who had accompanied him on the pioneer hop



to Guadalcanal. Command of the 67th went to Capt. John A. Thompson, who had headed the second flight of P-400's from New Caledonia.

In September, General Harmon acquired P-38's diverted from General Kenney's command. These were assigned to the 339th. During October the Lightnings were held in New Caledonia; training was not yet complete and frequency of naval bombardments of Henderson too high to risk the new fighters on Guadalcanal. By mid-November, however, they were ready to move.

On the morning of the 12th, the P-38's had left Tontouta at 0700, escorted by a B-17. Upon landing at Espiritu after 3½ hours' flight, mechanics discovered that low fuel consumption would have permitted a non-stop flight to Guadalcanal. The pilots, however, already showed fatigue. En route to Henderson, radio report of an enemy attack was received, and the B-17 carrying the ground personnel turned back at the southern end of San Cristobal. Consequently, when the planes landed, the Marines turned to and serviced them. On the 13th, additional AAF reinforcements arrived: eight more P-38's from the Fifth Air Force, flying in nonstop from Milne Bay.

Dawn of Friday the 13th found the Japanese battleship *Hiyei* limping northwest of Savo. A casualty of the encounter with Admiral Callaghan, she became the main preoccupation of the American planes in the combat area. First blood was drawn by the *Enterprise*, which was cruising south of Guadalcanal with a damaged No. 1 elevator. The carrier decided to ease operations by sending some of her planes to Henderson Field. Nine TBF's and six fighters flew off and at 1100 sighted the *Hiyei*, a light cruiser, and four destroyers headed for Guadalcanal, perhaps to finish off the *Portland*, lying off Lunga Point. The TBF's promptly put three fish into the battleship.

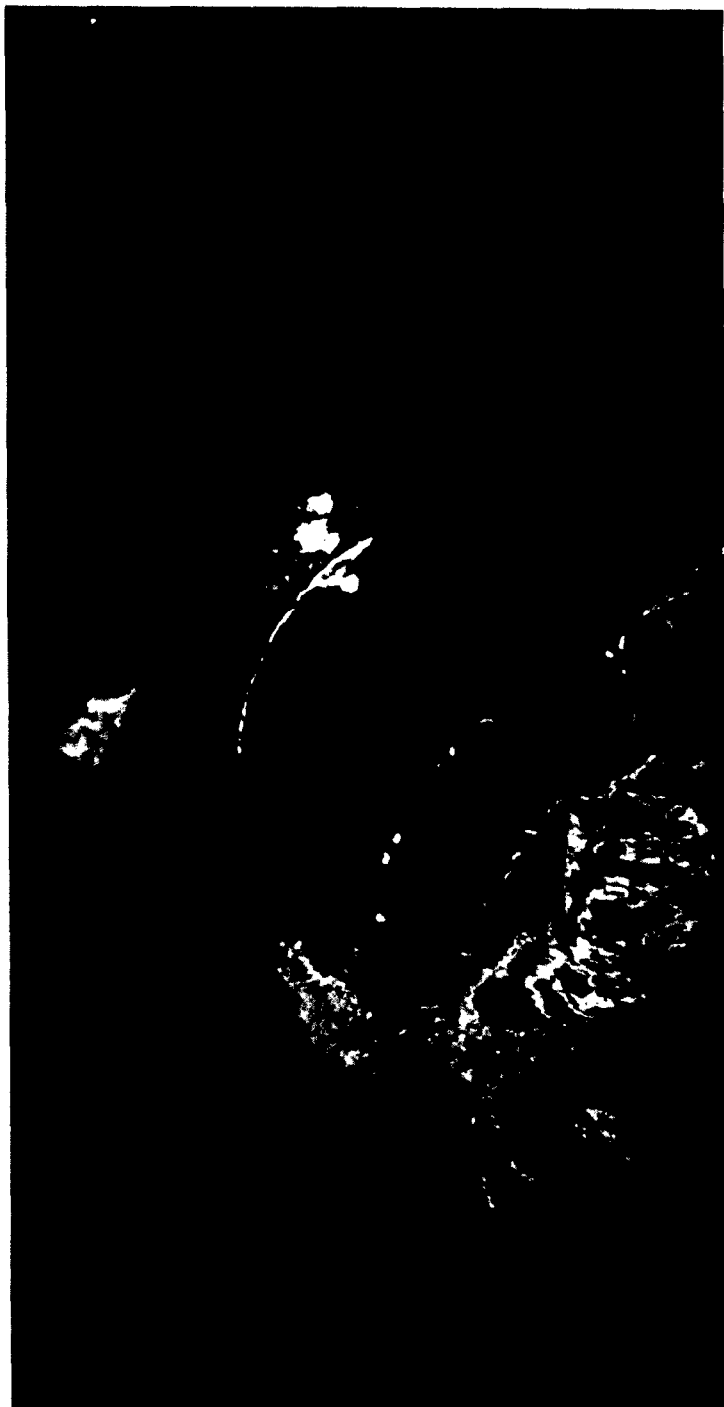
Shortly afterward 17 Forts arrived. These had departed Espiritu at 0500 and had subsequently been ordered to attack a carrier and a battleship reported by a search B-17. The indicated targets were out of range and the bombers proceeded to Guadalcanal, where they found the *Hiyei*, circling slowly with her escorts. Despite heavy AAA fire, one sure hit was obtained and five probables. All day long Marine and Navy aircraft at Guadalcanal hammered the *Hiyei*, the 67th providing top cover with four of its planes. By evening, however, the battleship was still afloat.

It is probable that the *Hiyei* was towed into position to assist in the bombardment of Henderson Field that night. The shelling, carried out by destroyers and cruisers as well, lasted 80 minutes until interrupted by the PT boats from Tulagi. On the field, one SBD and two F4F-4's were destroyed and 17 F4F-4's damaged. The 67th seemed to be the main target, every salvo but one landing near its camp at the north end of the fighter strip. Sixteen planes had been in commission the evening before; only one now remained, "the Resurrection, the oldest, most beat-up klunker on the field." Affording some consolation, nothing but an enormous oil slick suggested the *Hiyei* on the 14th. Whether at this point the Japanese supposed Henderson Field had been knocked out, as it had virtually been knocked out by similar shellings in October, or thought that the American Navy was too weak to interfere, or accepted a combination of these hypotheses, is unknown. At any rate, Japanese transports which had been hovering in the Upper Solomons finally reversed course and came on for Guadalcanal.

### *Concentrate on Jap Convoy*

On the 14th COMSOPAC directed the *Enterprise* to attack these transports and as additional striking power the B-26's of the 70th Squadron were sent up to Guadalcanal. Under Maj. Leroy L. Stefanowicz, 10 Marauders, in company with four P-38's, left Plaines des Gaiacs at 0800. At Espiritu Santo, the bombers were refueled and took off, disappearing in the clouds before the P-38's could be readied for flight. Meanwhile, during the morning, the planes of the *Enterprise* and Marine flyers from Henderson struck at the warships, now retiring to the north, whose shells had wrought such havoc with the 67th the previous night.

At 0830, General Harmon had reported that his search B-17's had sighted the Japanese convoy—cargo ships and transports, 12 of them 20 miles north of New Georgia. The escort consisted of a near-dozen warships never positively identified. In addition, there was an advance group of vessels including at least one battleship. Among the B-17's making contact was "Typhoon McGoon." "Typhoon McGoon" came back to Espiritu with tail surfaces entirely shot away. It had fought off 3 ME-109's, 3 Zekes, and a Rufe, shooting down 3 of these



**DIRECT HIT.** B-17's of the 11th Bombardment Group halted Japanese battleship of the Fuso class when one Fortress obtained a hit with a 500-pound bomb. Following B-17's obtained additional hits and when last seen the ship was burning furiously. The action occurred north of Savo Island on 13 November 1943.

and perhaps 2 more. First Marine Air Wing at Guadalcanal heard "Typhoon McGoon's" report and the dive and torpedo planes were readied.

The convoy, carrying a force which General Vandegrift put at 30,000 to 35,000 troops, had been sighted and hit during the morning by SBD's from the *Enterprise*. At 1018, 16 B-17's were ordered to attack from Espiritu. While the Forts were making their way northward, Marine and Navy planes from Henderson carried out two damaging strikes on the Japanese armada. The B-17's arrived in two flights, the first securing one hit on a transport from 17,000; the second straddling a seaplane tender from 20,000. Of 15 land-based Zeros intercepting, at least five were shot down. The bombers suffered only minor damage. Throughout the day the destruction of the transports, now separated from their escort, continued. The 67th, able to put only four planes in the air, helped provide high cover for the TBF's and SBD's. By nightfall, eight of the 12 vessels were either sunk or gutted.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 15 November, the U. S. Navy task force, commanded by Rear Adm. Willis A. Lee, sailed past Savo with the *South Dakota* and the *Washington* and slugged the Japanese hard. The enemy had come down with a force including two battleships and a half-dozen cruisers; he left for safer waters minus the *Kirishima*, the *Hiyei's* sister ship. Two cruisers, one heavy and one light, may also have been sunk.

With daylight of the 15th, one of the 67th's P-39's was out looking for breakfast fires, new tracks through the jungle, any sign of enemy activity. It was no routine patrol. Along the shore at Tassafaronga, about 18 miles west of Lunga Point, the pilot saw a beached vessel; two more were in process of beaching and another was heading for shore. Here were the survivors of the 12-ship convoy which had been worked over the afternoon before. To make sure, the pilot flew over at 800 feet with the AAA literally bursting under his nose, then back to Henderson with his discovery.

### *Mop-Up*

Abetted by the Navy and Marine flyers, the 67th Fighter and 70th Bombardment Squadrons played havoc with the beached vessels. By 0700 the 67th had in commission five planes which went out with the

SBD's and the B-26's. All five dived on the last ship to reach the beach, scoring two direct hits, setting the vessel afire. The B-26's dropped a 1,000-pounder on the third ship from 8,000 feet; two more 1,000-pounders burst among small craft attempting to unload supplies. At 0900, the 67th returned with seven aircraft, to put four bombs on the only vessel not then burning.

When the Japanese vessels were reported off Tassafaronga, 14 B-17's left Espiritu to attack. The first flight, arriving over the beach to find the destroyer *Meade* shelling ships which were already on fire, did not bomb. The second flight continued on up to the Russell Islands, made two hits on a burning transport—one of four derelicts abandoned by the Japanese in that area.

The Marines meanwhile had been able to bring a 155-millimeter battery to bear on one of the ships, in addition to the 600 rounds the *Meade* had expended. Marine or Navy aircraft attacked all day, and at 1045 four P-39's made a hit on the least damaged of the blazing hulks. On their return the flight spotted the bow of a sinking war-ship. Heads bobbed in the water nearby, whether friendly or enemy the pilots did not know. Returning to the *Meade*, the flight strung out in line, flew across the destroyer's bow, wagglng wings—out to the survivors and back. Three of these circuits convinced the destroyer and she went to investigate. The bobbing heads *were* American.

The ruined vessels off Tassafaronga burned for 4 days, their twisted hulks symbolic of the blasted Japanese hopes. A phase of the Solomons campaign was at an end: Guadalcanal and Tulagi were now secure and the American forces could give some thought to an offensive. The decision in November, unlike that of the previous month, had been obtained in two short but intense naval actions. The 67th, chief victim of the only Japanese shelling during the critical period, had been unable to strike heavy blows. Nor, in the nature of the case, could the B-17's based 640 miles away at Espiritu. Admirals Scott and Callaghan, killed in action, and Admiral Lee deservedly garnered the greater part of the glory.

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After their decisive beating in mid-November, the Japanese made no major effort to recover Guadalcanal. During December and January the Express continued to run, putting small forces ashore and a

rather large one on 14 January. These increments, however, were in the nature of replacements. Henceforth, the enemy was forced to content himself with a tenacious defense; never again did he mount a sustained threat to Henderson Field.

For the Americans, the defensive period on Guadalcanal was over by December. The 1st Marine Division had borne the brunt of the Japanese assaults on Henderson Field. With the exception of the 8th and 2d Marine Regiments, it was withdrawn on 9 December to be replaced during December and early January by two Army divisions. These were the Americal, which began arriving in November, and the 25th. These units, plus the fresh 6th Marine Regiment and the 2d Battalion of the 10th Marines, now proceeded to the offensive on Guadalcanal. On 9 December, Maj. Gen. Alexander M. Patch, USA, succeeded General Vandergrift, USMC, as island commander.

With more abundant fuel and supplies, air operations proceeded on a more extensive scale. The pattern remained the same. The Marines still directed air activity, but the USAAF was more heavily represented. The AAF now was able to send up additional fighter units, its heavy bombers moved forward to base on Guadalcanal, and all forces struck regularly at the Express on its trips down The Slot. Buin was in easy range of the B-17's and the new Japanese base at Munda Point received constant attention.

On 17 December a preliminary offensive to the west was initiated. When the 25th Division, under Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins, was brought into position, a determined drive up Guadalcanal's north coast was undertaken. The XIV Corps' push, opened on 10 January, proceeded amid bitter fighting, and finally freed Henderson from the menace of Pistol Pete. On 9 February organized Japanese resistance was eliminated. On the 8th, a search plane sighted 15 enemy destroyers heading up the channel, the last run of the famous Express. It had apparently evacuated the remaining officers and active troops and left hundreds of sick, wounded, and starving Japanese to be swept up by the Army.

AAF units on Guadalcanal worked with the ground forces in much the same manner as had the old 67th Fighter Squadron. Better planes were available: P-38's for escort, P-40's for the middle air, and P-39's for escort and ground strafing. If a particularly stubborn enemy strongpoint were encountered, the B-17's might be called on

to clear the way. The 67th had retired from Guadalcanal for a well-deserved rest, but pilots of the 44th, 68th, 70th, and 339th Fighter Squadrons took up the burden.

Most significant among these encouraging events was the activation of the Thirteenth Air Force, occurring, appropriately enough, on 13 January 1943. Although operational control remained with COMSOPAC, AAF units henceforth were trained and administered by a theater air force, under General Twining. It was this air force, evolved from such pioneer units as the 11th Group and the 67th Fighter Squadron, that was destined to move up through the Solomons until it rested on the Admiralties beyond Rabaul, then to swing along the north coast of New Guinea, through successive forward strides, anticipating the day when its mission reports would come in headed—Tokyo.

